

JOHN BARTON

# Playing Shakespeare

with a foreword by

TREVOR NUNN

METHUEN London and New York  
in association with Channel Four Television Company Limited

**A METHUEN PAPERBACK**

First published in 1984 in simultaneous hardback and paperback editions  
by Methuen London Ltd, 11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE  
and Methuen Inc, 29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001.

Reprinted 1985 and 1986

Copyright © 1984 by John Barton

Foreword copyright © 1984 by Trevor Nunn

Printed in Great Britain

by Richard Clay Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Barton John

Playing Shakespeare.

1. Shakespeare, William—Dramatic production

I. Title

792.9 PR3091

ISBN 0-413-54780-9

ISBN 0-413-54790-6 Pbk

**CAUTION**

This title is available in both hardback  
and paperback editions. The paperback is sold  
subject to the condition that it shall not,  
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent,  
re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated  
without the publisher's prior consent in any form  
of binding or cover other than that in which  
it is published and without a similar condition  
including this condition being imposed  
on the subsequent purchaser.

## Contents

Foreword by Trevor Nunn page vii

Preface 1

### PART ONE: Objective Things

- |   |   |     |
|---|---|-----|
| 1 | The Two Traditions— <i>Elizabethan and Modern Acting</i>          | 6   |
| 2 | Using the Verse— <i>Heightened and Naturalistic Verse</i>         | 25  |
| 3 | Language and Character— <i>Making the Words One's Own</i>         | 47  |
| 4 | Using the Prose— <i>Why does Shakespeare use Prose?</i>           | 68  |
| 5 | Set Speeches and Soliloquies— <i>Taking the Audience with You</i> | 86  |
| 6 | Using the Sonnets— <i>Going over Some Old Ground</i>              | 103 |

### PART TWO: Subjective Things

- |    |   |     |
|----|---|-----|
| 7  | Irony and Ambiguity— <i>Text that isn't what it seems</i> | 120 |
| 8  | Passion and Coolness— <i>A Question of Balance</i>        | 134 |
| 9  | Rehearsing the Text— <i>Orsino and Viola</i>              | 150 |
| 10 | Exploring a Character— <i>Playing Shylock</i>             | 169 |
| 11 | Contemporary Shakespeare— <i>A Discussion</i>             | 181 |
| 12 | Poetry and Hidden Poetry— <i>Three Kinds of Failure</i>   | 194 |

## Foreword

### Actors

who took part in 'Playing Shakespeare'

PEGGY ASHCROFT  
TONY CHURCH  
SINEAD CUSACK  
JUDI DENCH  
SUSAN FLEETWOOD  
MIKE GWILYM  
SHEILA HANCOCK  
LISA HARROW  
ALAN HOWARD  
BEN KINGSLEY  
JANE LAPOTAIRE  
BARBARA LEIGH-HUNT  
IAN McKELLEN  
RICHARD PASCO  
MICHAEL PENNINGTON  
ROGER REES  
NORMAN RODWAY  
DONALD SINDEN  
PATRICK STEWART  
DAVID SUCHET  
MICHAEL WILLIAMS

The young man with the Renaissance face was John Barton. I had heard of him of course, but there on the stage of the Arts Theatre Cambridge, directing a battle scene for a Marlowe Society production, was the man himself, with tapered trousers and bulky cardigan, giving him a seventeenth century silhouette confirmed by a noble beard, high forehead, an expression in the eyes both haught and hawk and rich brown crinkled hair. He was Essex or Raleigh—dashing, formidable and in bursts of energy, like a whirlwind. My mental picture of my first sighting of John Barton betrays something of the impressionable eighteen year old student I was, and something of the need eighteen year old students have for legends, and larger than life heroes and enemies. In 1959 John was a Cambridge legend; he had directed countless university productions to professionally high standards, he had become a young and romantic don as the Lay Dean of Kings, with the Elizabethan Theatre Company he had pioneered small cast touring Shakespeare productions, and he had been invited to become a founder director of the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon. None of that of course contributed much to the legend—no it was the fact that he chewed razor blades for fun, that he knew every line of the First Folio by heart, that he spoke Chaucer's English, that he was a brilliant and extremely dangerous sword fighter, that he was hilariously absent-minded, obsessed with cricket, a chain-smoker, an expert on Napoleon and somebody who enjoyed working sixteen hours a day without a break.

A lot of water has flowed under the bridges of the Cam since then; my need for heroes has diminished, while my regard for John Barton has increased. For much of the intervening time, since 1964 in fact, we have worked for the same company; we have shared similar ideals about the training and development of actors; we have collaborated on productions; we have asked for each others aid when things have gone wrong and we have become fast friends as much through adversity as through the sweet smell of success. And to the best of my knowledge John has given up chewing razor blades.

In 1965 I had a formative experience. I had been working for the RSC for a year. I had altogether lost my way and was suffering a crisis of confidence. John Barton proposed to me that he and I should collaborate

on a re-working of *Henry V*, which had been part of the famous Stratford history cycle the previous year. For the six weeks of the rehearsal period I became the world expert on John's absent-mindedness, I came to love the sixteen-hour day (I was already O.K. on cricket and Napoleon) and I learned more about unlocking a Shakespeare text than any scholarship could have taught me. I had always thought of Henry V as a role full of splendid and necessary rhetoric. Under John's direction, the mighty 'set speech' we know as Crispin's Day, for example, became the spontaneous, almost desperately improvised attempt by a young leader to hold the morale of his men together as they stared at inevitable defeat; and instead of there being any sense that the actor was delivering a previously written text, Ian Holm, as Henry, thought and discovered those words out of the situation and of his character. Every clue of where to breathe, what to stress, when to run on, what to throw away was there in the text, if only like John you knew what to look for. But the poetry was not an end in itself. The words became necessary. It wasn't verse speaking. It was acting.

In 1979 John and I collaborated in a way that was new to both of us; we accepted Melvyn Bragg's invitation on behalf of London Weekend Television to make a programme about the difficulties and techniques of speaking verse, and together with Terry Hands and a small group of RSC actors, we conducted a session in front of an audience similar to the demonstration lectures all of us had done years previously as part of our company's work in education. The material we shot was sufficiently interesting to make Melvyn decide that it should become not one, but two programmes and *Word of Mouth* Parts 1 and 2 was duly transmitted to considerable acclaim in 1980.

The actors were articulate, Terry and I did what was required of us, but the star of the programmes was John Barton, partly because he appeared not to know that the cameras were there, and partly because he did know so much more about the subject than all the rest of us put together. A series was proposed. John and I attended many hours of meetings delineating a structure and content for thirteen programmes, but shortage of money and studio time postponed the whole project. I was relieved and delighted when the idea was taken up again and although I was unavailable to contribute, John agreed to make it his main RSC task for the second half of 1983. It was a very happy accident.

What the programmes, and now the published texts of the series, reveal, is the method and principle of an approach to acting Shakespeare which has been fundamental to the Royal Shakespeare Company since it was formed. This approach is not didactic or political or scholastic or literary. It relies a good deal on analysis, but just as much on commonsense and pragmatism, and a sense of theatre and of character; it attempts to serve the complexities and contradictions of the text, but it is also trying to make the language *work*, and to be alive and exciting in the theatre.

Generations of actors joining the RSC have benefited from John Barton's

teaching, and so too of directors. The Company is founded on continuity. It is surely unique that a television series can field a cast of internationally and nationally famous performers who are present precisely because they continue to feel themselves to be members of a theatre company, and who have shared the experience of trying to communicate the ambiguities and complexities of the greatest of all dramatists. I have been privileged to lead the fortunes of this Company for many years, and I confess to ferocious pride in its achievements; there is something in the texts of these programmes that underpins all RSC achievements, and something which makes the series *Playing Shakespeare* an RSC achievement in its own right.

TREVOR NUNN

## Preface

(1)

This book springs out of special circumstances and has one very particular aim. On the surface it is the record of nine workshop programmes made in 1982 by the Royal Shakespeare Company for London Weekend Television and shown on Channel Four in 1984. At first I rather doubted whether this material should be published. I felt that the series depended quite as much on the live contributions of the actors who took part in it, whether in discussion or demonstration, as on the various expositions and explanations made by myself. And I much regret that a book cannot properly recapture their contribution and the way in which they brought many characters alive on the screen at a moment's notice. Yet my reason for wanting to publish the material is entirely to do with actors.

But first I should define what this book consists of. It sticks pretty closely to the television programmes on which it is based, although I have tried to clean it up and clarify it throughout. The workshops were partly scripted and partly unscripted and were devised for a wide and not a specialist audience. Everywhere points had to be made as succinctly as possible because of the viewing time available, which explains why there are often savage cuts in the Shakespearean passages we worked on. Two chapters on Heightened Language and on Character have had to be presented as one. We recorded much more material than we were able to screen, and chapters 4, 6 and 11 therefore appear here for the first time. Much of the material had to be shot out of order, depending on which actors were able to take part on different shooting days, and the extent of each actor's involvement depended on their availability from other work. This explains why, sadly, some of them only made a brief appearance.

Because much of our work was rough-and-ready I have here edited, cut and expanded the original material and reworded it where any of us who took part were unclear or imprecise. I have not however tried to conceal the fact that the material was begotten for television rather than for libraries. The book is set out as a dialogue because that is what *Playing Shakespeare* was: a series of conversations, rather than something conceived in literary

form. I hope that this is the best way to present its subject-matter clearly. I believe that acting is a subject for discussion rather than just exposition.

(2)

Now for this book's why and wherefore. For many years I have heard actors who were new to Shakespeare lament that they could find nothing written which would assist them directly in handling his text and particularly his verse. Although there is no lack of material about all aspects of his plays and stagecraft, most actors feel that this does not really help them as actors. One of them once showed me a Shakespearean Grammar he had got hold of in the hope of getting his bearings. It was a daunting document, full of technical terms which alarmed rather than enlightened. But what of Granville Barker? It is now over fifty years since he wrote his *Prefaces to Shakespeare*. It used to be thought that he had made a major break-through by looking at Shakespeare in essentially theatrical terms, but these days actors do not respond to him. They feel, and I think justly, that though his heart is in the right place and he is rich in perception, he is of little practical use to them because he is rarely specific about the details of how Shakespeare's verse *works* or how an actor should come to terms with it. They are put off by his assumption of his reader's sensibility to and knowledge of Shakespeare and by the generalised tone of a passage such as this:

The actor, in fine, must think of the dialogue in terms of music; of the tune and rhythm of it as at one with the sense—sometimes outbidding the sense—in telling him what to do and how to do it, in telling him, indeed, what to be.  
Preface to *Love's Labour's Lost*

This is in fact a shrewd and just comment on the passage to which it refers. Yet the one thing it does *not* achieve is to tell an actor what to do or how to do it. Granville Barker delivers an aesthetic injunction but does not go into practical or line-by-line detail. That is surprising as he was an actor and a director, and a very fine one. Though he is basically right in what he urges, the way he puts it is more likely to affright an actor than to stimulate him:

Let him rather acquire an articulate tongue, an unailing ear for the pervasive melody and cadence of the verse, let him yield to its impetus, and—provided, of course, that he knows more or less what it is all about, and this sympathetic self-surrender will aid him there—Shakespeare can be counted on to carry him through.  
Preface to *Othello*

To an actor such advice is deadly. Acting is built upon specifics but Granville Barker is tantalisingly literary and vague. I think that today he also sounds condescending. He anatomises the text but not the habit of mind

of the actor who has to play that text. He does not, for instance, seem to understand the natural fear that many actors have of poetry. I hope that *Playing Shakespeare* may explain that fear a little and maybe help to ease it.

But what of the many scholars, especially in recent years, who have made 'Shakespeare in the Theatre' their theme and who have stressed over and over that his plays must be studied in relation to the stage for which they were written? Are they no help to actors either? The answer is, I think, not yet, or at least not deeply. This is not primarily due to any insensitivity in either the scholars or the actors. There is rather a problem of communication and a lack of information. The kinds of thing that concern an actor in the rehearsal room are not normally written down. Consequently I believe that a book which reflects the way that actors think about Shakespeare now is needed. So I hope not only that some actors may find this book useful but also that it may serve, not as an authoritative statement, but as a useful theatre document and case-book for those who study and write about Shakespeare.

One thing we would all like to know, of course, is how Shakespeare's actors rehearsed a part and what way their minds worked. I have suggested in this book some of the things they must have instinctively gleaned from the text and how an actor today can easily do the same. Much that is said here is obvious, yet I know from experience that it needs saying over and over. Much is crude or over-simplified. Much is either too narrow or too general. And some is probably plain wrong. But I must confess that I have never worried over-much about the precise accuracy of what I may say in the rehearsal room. The test there is not whether a given statement is objectively true but whether it helps, stimulates and releases an actor at a particular rehearsal. If it does so, then the advice is useful. If it does not, however true it may be, it has no practical use in that particular context. Dangerous words, but I believe that, theatrically speaking, they are realistic. It is not enough for a director to speak true. He must reach and help the actors with whom he is working, and if he does not do so then he fails them. So the kind of points I have tried to make below do not derive solely from my own inner view of Shakespeare but from a verbal tradition I have learned and shared over many years in the hurly-burly of the rehearsal room. I much regret that the need to compress things for television has led to my too often laying down the law. When the questions covered in *Playing Shakespeare* come up in rehearsal they of course emerge in a more free-wheeling way.

The twelve chapters that follow cover what seem to me the most important areas in which an actor needs to find his bearings. I have tried to concentrate throughout on the pragmatic question, 'How does Shakespeare's text actually *work*?' I realise of course that what I have to say must often represent my own subjective response to the text rather than a completely objective account of what goes on. Even so, I think it will be

found that most of the first six chapters do present a reasonably objective analysis. The second half of the book is certainly more subjective, but I believe that most of the ground covered is to do with common-sense rather than with anything mysterious. I have also tried to keep away from the question of directing the plays as irrelevant to the main purpose, though I have of course handled it by implication. If these chapters help a few actors to find their way with Shakespeare I shall be content. If they stimulate scholars and critics to take a similar approach but to do it better, I shall be delighted. In spite of the important work which has been done on Shakespeare's text in the theatre and in the study over the last forty or fifty years, I believe that the way actors handle that text still has a long way to go. In the meantime I should like to dedicate *Playing Shakespeare* to the actors, not only all those who took part in these workshops, but all the actors I have ever worked with. It is from them that I hope I have learned something of what a Shakespearean actor needs to know.

PART ONE

## Objective Things

*Note:* all the Shakespearean quotations have been standardized as follows:  
The *Plays* follow the text of the New Penguin Shakespeare with the exception of *Cymbeline*, *Titus Andronicus* and *Troilus and Cressida*, which were not yet published when this book was prepared; for these the Cambridge University Press New Shakespeare was used.

The *Sonnets* follow the edition of W. G. Ingram and Theodore Redpath (Hodder & Stoughton, 3rd Impression, 1978).

Omissions within quoted texts are designated by ...

found that most of the first six chapters do present a reasonably objective analysis. The second half of the book is certainly more subjective, but I believe that most of the ground covered is to do with common-sense rather than with anything mysterious. I have also tried to keep away from the question of directing the plays as irrelevant to the main purpose, though I have of course handled it by implication. If these chapters help a few actors to find their way with Shakespeare I shall be content. If they stimulate scholars and critics to take a similar approach but to do it better, I shall be delighted. In spite of the important work which has been done on Shakespeare's text in the theatre and in the study over the last forty or fifty years, I believe that the way actors handle that text still has a long way to go. In the meantime I should like to dedicate *Playing Shakespeare* to the actors, not only all those who took part in these workshops, but all the actors I have ever worked with. It is from them that I hope I have learned something of what a Shakespearean actor needs to know.

PART ONE

## Objective Things

*Note:* all the Shakespearean quotations have been standardized as follows: The *Plays* follow the text of the New Penguin Shakespeare with the exception of *Cymbeline*, *Titus Andronicus* and *Troilus and Cressida*, which were not yet published when this book was prepared; for these the Cambridge University Press New Shakespeare was used.

The *Sonnets* follow the edition of W. G. Ingram and Theodore Redpath (Hodder & Stoughton, 3rd Impression, 1978).

Omissions within quoted texts are designated by ...



## CHAPTER ONE

## The Two Traditions

*Elizabethan and Modern Acting*

[The following actors took part in the programme that forms the basis of this chapter: MIKE GWILYM, SHEILA HANCOCK, LISA HARROW, ALAN HOWARD, BEN KINGSLEY, IAN McKELLEN, DAVID SUCHET.]

Playing Shakespeare. Not reading him or writing about him but *playing* him. Over a thousand books or articles are written about him every year. In 1980 there were 195 books and 877 articles, many in Japanese. And yet very little is put on paper about how to act him. I think I can guess why. I have been urged to write about this but I have always felt I couldn't do it. I thought that the sort of points that need to be made could only arise truly in the living context of working with actors. On this subject each actor and his experience of acting is worth many books. So what I shall be saying in *Playing Shakespeare* is by itself worth nothing. It only has value if it comes alive in the performances of living and breathing actors.

The best guide to an actor who wants to play in Shakespeare comes, I think, from Shakespeare himself who was an actor. Listen to Hamlet's advice to the players. It can't be quoted too often.

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue. But if you mouth it as many of our players do, I had as lief the town crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus. But use all gently. For in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness . . . Be not too tame neither. But let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature . . . For anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as t'were, the mirror up to nature.

*Hamlet: III:2*

I believe that speech goes to the very heart of it. It's one of those utterances which seems a bit simple and limited at first, but if you live with it you will find that it begins to resonate and to open doors. I also believe that in the Elizabethan theatre the actors knew how to use and interpret the *hidden*

*direction* Shakespeare himself provided in his verse and his prose. I believe that the kind of points we shall be making in these workshops work best in the theatre, not by a director telling an actor about them but by an actor learning them, largely by experience, and applying them for himself.

There are few absolute rules about playing Shakespeare but many possibilities. We don't offer ourselves as high priests but as explorers or detectives. We want to test and to question. Particularly we want to show how Shakespeare's own text can help to solve the seeming problems in that text. Of course, much of it is instinct and guesswork. We will try to distinguish between what is clearly and objectively so and what is highly subjective. I hope that if I'm too dogmatic the actors will challenge me. I should also make it clear what I'm *not* talking about. I shall hardly talk at all about directing, and at first I shall try to keep clear of interpretation. We won't talk much about individual characters, and we shall say even less about plays as a whole. We shall simply concentrate on finding out how Shakespeare's text *works*.

Of course what we say is bound to be personal. We don't believe that there's only one way of tackling Shakespeare. That way madness lies. But out of the infinite number of questions which come up when we work on him we have picked the ones that seem to us the most important at this time. Another actor or another director would rightly stress things differently or violently disagree with us or stress points which we shall leave out. What we say will of course be coloured and limited by the fact that we are the products of a particular time. One bit of me is uneasy at holding forth about Shakespeare. I am not a pundit but a man who works in the theatre at this moment and I can only talk about what seem to me the main needs and problems at this moment. I am deeply aware that these sessions will probably seem out-dated and odd before many years are past. That is the nature of the theatre. We can only speak about what we think and feel at this time.

We shall look at many short individual passages, often cut down, from many different plays. I believe they can all make sense out of context and that those who don't know the play in question will still be able to follow quite easily the points we are making. As ever, the audience is quite as important in all this as the actors. If we don't reach our audience we fail. We must make them listen and share and follow the story. But above all, *listen*. It's so easy for an audience *not* to listen, particularly with a knotty and difficult text. I may be cynical but I don't believe most people really listen to Shakespeare in the theatre unless the actors make them do so. I certainly don't. I know that it's too easy for me to get the general gist and feeling of a speech, but just because I get the gist I often don't listen to the lines in detail. Not unless the actors make me. What I want to explore are the ways in which they can achieve that.

But you may say, 'All that's very fine, but what's so difficult about acting Shakespeare? What's the problem?' Or indeed 'Is there a problem?' Well,

yes, I believe that there is. Two things need to come together and they won't do so without a lot of hard work and much trial and error. First, there's Shakespeare's text written at a particular time and for particular actors:

Cut me to pieces, Volsces. Men and lads,  
Stain all your edges on me. 'Boy!' False hound!  
If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there  
That, like an eagle in a dove-cote, I  
Fluttered your Volsicians in Coriotes.  
Alone I did it. 'Boy!'

*Coriolanus: V. 6.*

Secondly there are the actors today with their modern habit of mind and their different acting tradition, based on the kind of text that they're more used to:

LEN (*Mike Gwilym*): 'S great 'ere.  
PAM (*Lisa Harrow*): What?  
LEN: Why did you pick me up like that?  
PAM: Why?  
LEN: Yeh.  
PAM: Sorry, then?  
LEN: Tell us.  
PAM: 'Ow many girls you 'ad?  
LEN: No, I tol' yer my life.  
PAM: 'Old on.  
LEN: What?  
PAM: Yer got a spot.  
LEN: Where?  
PAM: 'Old still.  
LEN: Is it big?  
PAM: 'Old still.  
LEN: Go easy.  
(*She burris the spot on his neck.*)  
PAM: Got it!  
LEN: Ow!

*Saved by Edward Bond*

Well, there we are. The two chief ingredients with which we start rehearsals are Shakespeare's text and a group of modern actors who work mostly on modern plays. How do the two come together? Let's start with the second as the more accessible. Our tradition is based more than we are usually conscious of on various modern influences like Freud and television and the cinema and, above all, the teachings of the director and actor, Stanislavsky. I suspect he works on us all the time, often without us knowing it. So let's ask ourselves what are the most important things in an actor's mind as he begins work on a modern text. No, any text. What are the most important things to go for?

## THE TWO TRADITIONS · 9

David Suchet: *We might do worse than start with something Stanislavsky wrote: 'If you speak any lines or do anything mechanically without fully realising who you are, where you come from, why, what you want, where you are going, and what you will do when you get there, you will be acting without imagination.'*

Ben Kingsley: *Or, to put it in our own words, what is our motivation, our objective or our aim or our intention? We use lots of words for the same thing.*

Sheila Hancock: *Here is Stanislavsky again: 'On the stage there cannot be, under any circumstances, action which is directed immediately at the arousing of a feeling for its own sake.'*

Lisa Harrow: *Or, in other words, we must beware of playing only the quality or general emotional tone of a speech. For instance, if we have a sad speech, we mustn't just sound sad. What we play must be specific and fresh.*

Alan Howard: *So we must dig into a character socially and psychologically.*

Ian McKellen: *Yes, socially, which means being concerned with other people, our audience and other characters on the stage, impersonated by the other actors. It's not enough to be aware of our own thoughts, our own feelings, our own words. We must listen to the words and understand the feelings and the thoughts of the other characters.*

I think the most basic thing in all that is the importance of asking the question 'What is my intention?' If we had to reduce our modern tradition to one single point I think it would be this. It is practical advice which always works and always helps the actor. Yet it is often confusing to people who approach a text from a literary or non-theatrical view-point. It seems to them to imply that we are saying a playwright always has a character's conscious intention in mind when he writes a given line, but of course that isn't necessarily so. A playwright can write a play without asking that question constantly or even most of the time. All that we in the theatre are saying is that to ask that question is the way to act without falseness. It always works, though of course many other elements are involved which we shall be looking at.

Mike Gwilym: *On the other hand we all know the sort of actor who won't speak at all until he feels absolutely the inner need to do so. Huge, long pauses. By the time he's ready he's brilliant, but the audience is fast asleep. So perhaps, it's good also to remember the story told of John*

*Gielgud. When he was asked 'Now, Sir John, what exactly is your intention at this point?', he answered 'To get onto the stage'.*

Yes, here and elsewhere, we will find that we can hardly ever make any generalisation about acting without adding some sort of qualification. Here is an over-serious theatrical practitioner who in his way is also talking about intentions:

*David Suchet: 'I should like to cite examples of game beats in the opening scene of King Lear. The game Lear wishes to play with his daughters, which might be called 'benevolent father and loving children' leads us to a model of the transactions needed to play it successfully. Now the child in Lear's child is cathected (which may be a symptom of old age, what we call second childishness) . . . Hence Lear's opening kick comes in the form of benevolent Parent and his social action is 'to divide his kingdom'. However, his object is ulterior and comes from his Cathected Child . . .'*

From an article by Arthur Wagner in *Tulane Drama Review*, Summer 1967

Beware of jargon. It can lead to *talking* about acting taking the place of actually *doing* it. Though we're exploring something complex and we must not overlook those complexities, we must all of us try all the time to be clear-headed and simple.

Well, I hope we're reasonably clear about what our modern tradition is. Actually it's a great deal more modern than we know. The key technical terms we use were not known to Elizabethan actors. They have only come into existence during the last hundred years or so. 'Characterisation' in our theatrical sense is a mid-nineteenth century word, though 'character' in the sense of a part assumed by an actor comes in a hundred years earlier. 'Motivation' seems to be a twentieth-century term and in its theatrical sense it hasn't yet got into the Oxford Dictionary. It's the same with one of our favourite words in the theatre, 'naturalistic'. This is salutary. I'm not decrying our modern tradition, merely trying to put it into perspective. It perhaps suggests how surprising our acting style would have seemed to the Elizabethans.

*Ian McKellen: I don't know that I agree with that. I suspect that actors through the generations have tried in their own terms to be real. After all, Hamlet's advice to the players seems to be good advice that a modern director might give to modern actors: don't be too theatrical, don't saw the air too much, but think about the reality of the situation. What is modern about our approach however is the jargon that we use. As you've just pointed out, 'motivation' is not a term that Shakespeare's actors would have understood. But the feeling behind what 'motivation' means, I suspect, Shakespeare and his actors would have understood very well.*

Yes, they didn't have the word 'motivation' but Hamlet does talk about having 'the motive and the cue for passion'.

*Alan Howard: I think that Elizabethan actors had an instinctive apprehension of all this. They didn't have some of the distractions that we have in our day. They depended more than we do on the spoken word. It was like food, and they probably used words much more sensually, almost eating words.*

Yes, one of Shakespeare's characters says as much. He says of another character, 'He hath never fed of the dainties that are bred in a book. He hath not eat paper, as it were: he hath not drunk ink'. 'Eating words' is a useful phrase.

*Mike Gwilym: What exactly do you mean when you say 'naturalistic'? That word can mean different things to different people, can't it?*

Yes, you're right, we must define it. By 'naturalistic' I mean the acting style and the kind of text which is the norm in the theatre and film and television today. The deliberate attempt to make everything as natural and lifelike as possible. But there are two other words we ought to explain. We've touched on playing the *quality* of a speech as opposed to the *intentions* behind it. Let's try to clarify that by looking at an example. Give us the opening line of *The Merchant of Venice*.

*Ian McKellen: 'In sooth I know not why I am so sad.'*

Now that simple line can be said in an infinite number of ways. On the one hand you could go for the mood and the quality of it. Try it, for instance, sadly.

*Ian McKellen: Do you mean by the mood or the quality, just painting it over with a colour called sadness?*

Yes, the feeling only.

*Ian McKellen (sadly): 'In sooth I know not why I am so sad.'*

Now try it humorously.

*Ian McKellen (humorously): 'In sooth I know not why I am so sad.'*

But now try and ask what is Antonio's *intention*. Perhaps it's to try to explain himself.

Ian McKellen: *So rather than painting the line, I should think about it and let the voice just do what it will?*

Yes, search your thoughts.

Ian McKellen: *Make a connection between the mouth and the brain and then with the heart: 'In sooth I know not why I am so sad.'*

Now try changing the intention to avoid explaining yourself.

Ian McKellen (does so): *'In sooth I know not why I am so sad.'*

Or try to make light of your sadness.

Ian McKellen (does so): *'In sooth I know not why I am so sad.'*

And one more: try to put an end to the conversation.

Ian McKellen (finally): *'In sooth I know not why I am so sad.'*

I don't think there's much doubt about it, is there? Playing the *quality* leads to bad acting, and going for the *intention* is more interesting and alive and human. The first is general and the second specific. We learn more about the speaker and his situation.

Ian McKellen: *Well, of course it's impossible to decide exactly how to say any line without considering many other things which are not directly related to what noise the tongue is making on the roof of the mouth. Like, Who am I saying the line to? How long have I known him? Where have we just been? What were the other words spoken before the first line of the play? Were there any words before the play began? What are likely to be the words spoken in later scenes? There's a whole complex of questions of which the sound is just the outward expression.*

So in other words, rehearsal of a scene is going to be about character and relationships and situations and certainly about social background. Today the director helps to sift those possibilities and at some point in rehearsals agreement is reached. In this case, it will probably be reached quite late on, because the possibilities are so many. Shakespeare never actually tells us for certain why Antonio is so sad. This simple example takes us, I think, to the heart of our modern acting tradition: relationships, character, intentions. So don't let us lose touch with that because we'll keep coming back to it.

But what about the Elizabethan theatre? We don't know all that much about how they rehearsed, but we do know that direction in the sense of detailed analysis of the scene or play probably didn't exist.

David Suchet: *They had no director in our sense, though the author often instructed the actors.*

Mike Gwilym: *Just as Hamlet was doing in his advice to the players. Because he actually wrote the speech that the players were going to insert into their performance it was assumed he had the right to direct it as well.*

Lisa Harrow: *Elizabethan actors had very little rehearsal, virtually none in our terms.*

Yes, the diary of an Elizabethan theatre manager shows that they might have had as many as forty plays in their repertory in a year. And that they had to put on a play in a few days.

Ben Kingsley: *The outdoor theatre with its particular demands and its distractions perhaps forced a cruder style on the actors than we aim for now. The traditional style of acting was formal and bombastic and Shakespeare tried to get away from it.*

Mike Gwilym: *And they didn't have the luxury of time that we have. We now approach a character rather as a psychiatrist would approach a patient. We sort of sniff around him. Very often we don't even stand up with the text till three weeks into rehearsal. We sometimes take ten weeks to rehearse a Shakespeare play.*

Alan Howard: *But Elizabethan actors didn't even have the whole text to study. Even leading actors had their parts written out separately with none of the rest of the text except their cues. I can remember when I first started in rep. that we used to get things called 'cue scripts' which were only your own part with the cue immediately before it, just the last sentence. So you could tell whether you had a big part or a small part that fornicity because it would either be this thick or that thick. But you had no sense of the whole play.*

Yet Shakespeare wrote for the Elizabethan theatre, and he wrote these infinitely rich and complex plays with great psychological depth. I don't think he would have done it unless his actors could have done him justice. And I hope we can show later how Shakespeare's text is full of hidden hints to the actors. When an actor becomes aware of them he will find that Shakespeare himself starts to direct him. I believe that is what happened among his Elizabethan actors, and that they did instinctively what we do consciously and intellectually. I also believe that Shakespeare both accepted his own theatrical tradition and yet transformed it. In a sense I think that he is the unconscious inventor both of characterisation in depth and of naturalistic speech. There's not much of it in the theatre before him. Let's look at the fashion that he inherited. First, let's hear a conqueror boasting.

TAMBURLAINE (*Alan Howard*): I will, with engines never exercis'd  
 Conquer, sack, and utterly consume  
 Your cities and your golden palaces,  
 And with the flames that beat against the clouds  
 Incense the Heavens and make the stars to melt, . . .  
 And, till by vision or by speech I hear  
 Immortal Jove say 'Cease my Tamburlaine,'  
 I will persist a terror to the world  
 Making the meteors (that like armèd men  
 Are seen to march upon the towers of Heaven,)  
 Run tilting round about the firmament  
 And break their burning lances in the air,  
 For honour of my wond'rous victories.

*Tamburlaine* by Christopher Marlowe

Very Marlovian. Here is high language, but there isn't much character or complexity. Now let's listen to a father finding his son murdered.

HERONIMO (*Ben Kingsley*): What outcries pluck me from my naked bed,  
 And chills my throbbing heart with trembling fear, . . .  
 Who calls Heronimo? Speak, here I am:  
 I did not slumber, therefore 'twas no dream, . . .  
 But stay, what murderous spectacle is this?  
 A man hanged up and all the murderers gone,  
 And in my bower to lay the guilt on me:  
 This place was made for pleasure not for death.  
 Those garments that he wears I oft have seen,  
 Alas, it is Horatio my sweet son,  
 O no, but he that whilom was my son.  
 O was it thou that call'dst me from my bed?  
 O speak if any spark of life remain.  
 I am thy father, who hath slain my son?

*The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd

There's an emotional situation there but very flat language. Yet Ben filled it out and so brought life to the spare crude text by living through the story. Now let's look at a third example of literary, Elizabethan prose, not from a play but typical of its author, John Lyly, who was also a dramatist.

*Sheila Hancock*: 'The Rose, although a little it be eaten with the canker, yet being distilled yieldeth sweet water, the iron, though fretted with the rust, yet being burnt in the fire shineth brighter, and wit although it hath been eaten with the canker of his owne conceit, and fretted with the rust of vain love, yet being purified in the still of wisdom, and tried in the fire of zeal, will shine bright and smell sweet in the nostrils of all young novices.'

*Euphues* by John Lyly

As you can see, character here is two-dimensional and rich language can

get monotonous. And these are examples of famous texts. Yet in Shakespeare our traditions, both the modern and the Elizabethan, come together. I believe our tradition actually derives from him. In a sense Shakespeare himself invented it, with his teeming gift for characterisation and his frequent use of naturalistic language, though he didn't of course know that he was doing so at the time. That's why I believe we'll find that the problem of how to marry the two traditions in fact doesn't exist once you get to know how Shakespeare's text *works*. If the actor gets in tune with it, he'll find many naturalistic clues and hints about character so that it does in fact combine the two traditions most of the time. But it may not always seem so to an actor who's new to Shakespeare. Sheila, you've only plunged into Shakespeare quite recently. Tell us your feelings about coming to terms with it.

*Sheila Hancock*: *Well, coming to it at my great old age, I must say I wondered whether I was going to have to alter my whole approach to my work. And indeed during the rehearsal process and in a situation like this I feel tremendously inhibited. But I found miraculously, when I got on the stage and in front of an audience and had to communicate, something quite extraordinary happened. I found that if I let it flow, just happen, it seemed the most natural thing in the world. And what's more the language was so potent that I felt I had to make less effort than I'd ever had to make before.*

Shakespeare did it for you?

*Sheila Hancock*: *Yes, I find sometimes that it seems better just to stand and say it. Possibly I'd absorbed a lot in the rehearsal. I don't know.*

*Mike Gwilym*: *I think the main thing is to trust the language. Every actor comes to this point when he approaches a Shakespeare text. Especially in emotional scenes where he thinks 'I know exactly how this character feels, I know the depth of his passion, and I know about what his brain is doing, but why have I got these flipping words in the way?' We have to come to terms with the fact that a character is not just what he says but how he says it.*

You've got to find out why the character needs those particular words.

*Lisa Harrow*: *I remember early on when I was just starting and you, John, were talking about the need to find the language, you said a very interesting thing. You said that the emotion in Shakespeare has to be bigger in order actually to create those words. That was a terrific note, because the moment I actually felt something more intense and bigger and then had to say those particular words I found that they did fit in with what I was feeling. And it was real.*

Ian McKellen: *We can take comfort from the fact that people who come to a theatre are called an audience . . . audio . . . 'hear'. People who watch television are viewers, and look rather than listen. And we're often helped today by working in smaller theatres without the distractions of big spectacle or scenery. The audience are close enough to pick up every detail of the voice's inflexions. It wasn't easy for nineteenth-century actors who were working in large theatres, or in America today where Shakespearean acting is different from ours, mainly, I think because their theatres are much larger. This leads to a grander, more generalised, open style of acting than perhaps we favour at the moment in England.*

I think there may be a greater difference than we realise between the senses of the Elizabethans and ourselves. For instance, they probably had a much sharper sense of smell than us because of the foulness of the stench in the streets. I'm sure they also had a much sharper ear than we have and that they picked up words in a way that we don't. We're more trained to go by the eye, as Ian says, from television and from films. I'm sure Elizabethan audiences' ears were sharper than ours.

Lisa Harrow: *The language was growing too, wasn't it? It was much more of a living thing than our language is.*

That may well be true. But we should look now in more detail into this question of marrying the Two Traditions. Let's go back to the opening of *The Merchant of Venice* where Antonio the merchant is talking to his friends Salerio and Solanio.

ANTONIO (*Ian McKellen*): In sooth I know not why I am so sad.  
It wearies me, you say it wearies you;  
But how I caught it, found it or came by it,  
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,  
I am to learn;  
And such a want-wit sadness makes of me  
That I have much ado to know myself.

SALERIO (*David Suchet*): Your mind is tossing on the ocean,  
There where your argosies with portly sail,  
Like signors and rich burghers on the flood,  
Or as it were the pageants of the sea,  
Do overpeer the petty traffickers  
That curtsy to them, do them reverence,  
As they fly by them with their woven wings.

*The Merchant of Venice: 1.1.*

Good. Now let's compare the two speeches. Antonio's is relatively naturalistic, isn't it? Or perhaps it's not?

Ian McKellen: *Yes, it's quite easy for a modern actor to get into because there aren't many old-fashioned words in it. Though I do note that it's written in verse and not prose. But it's occurred to me that I probably did it absolutely wrong and far too slow and ruminatively because Salerio says 'Your mind is tossing on the ocean'.*

That's probably true. But let's press on with our comparison of the two speeches. When I say yours is naturalistic it is not strictly true. It has poetic undertones which I want to look at later. I only mean it's naturalistic in comparison with Salerio whose text is actually much trickier for an actor because it's full of images and metaphors and similes. 'Tossing on the ocean', 'portly sail', 'burghers on the flood', 'pageants of the sea', 'curtsy to them', and so on. Note specially the metaphor 'As they fly by them with their woven wings'. Clearly Salerio's text is not naturalistic but is what we usually call 'heightened'. He is coining phrases and finding unusual ways of expressing himself. So first let's ask ourselves our basic question, what's his intention?

David Suchet: *I think his intention is to cheer Antonio up. Probably by sending him up.*

Good. So having first established his intention what do you do with the language to further that intention?

Ian McKellen: *Language which you would call 'heightened': can you define that? What is heightened language?*

Yes, I'm taking a favourite phrase too much for granted. I suppose the simplest way of defining it would be to say that it refers to any language which is not naturalistic. Any bit of text where there are images and metaphors and similes or rich, surprising language. If we compare the two speeches the difference is pretty obvious. Let's see what happens, for a moment, if we try to take Salerio's text naturalistically.

David Suchet: *What, completely flat and straight? As I might speak in an ordinary conversation?*

Just try and see what happens.

David Suchet (with many grunts and pauses):  
'Your mind is . . . er . . . tossing on . . . er . . . on the ocean . . .  
Er . . . there where your argosies with . . . er . . . portly sail,  
Like . . . er . . . signors and . . . er . . . we . . . rich burghers on the flood . . .'

Thank you, point made. It doesn't work, does it? We've just been listening

to what is sometimes called the 'naturalistic fallacy'. It's unclear and it's woolly and it's deadly slow. It's just not the way it's written. Heightened speech must be something that the actor, or rather the character he's playing, *finds for himself* because he needs those words and images to express his intention. So you, David, need those words to cheer up and send up Antonio. We can put this idea in various ways: we can say you've got to find them or coin them or *fresh-mint* them. We can use any word we want to describe the idea of inventing a phrase at the very moment it is uttered. The vital thing is that the speaker must *need* the phrase. He must not think of such phrases as simply words that pre-exist in the text. They have got to be words that he finds as he utters them.

Mike Gwilym: *A director often asks an actor to deal with a particularly heightened piece of language by putting it into inverted commas. The danger with that is that it sounds as if the actor is being very self-conscious about what he is saying. The trick is, I think, for the character rather than the actor to put the words into inverted commas. In this way he acknowledges to the audience that the language he is using is not common parlance or everyday speech. We can see him taking pleasure in choosing his words.*

Sheila Hancock: *Or we could put it another way and say, first clarify your intention about why you're making the speech. And then decide why you use those particular words in order to pursue that intention.*

That's right, every actor needs to do that. So let's take the speech again, choosing and coining the words with the intention of cheering him up and sending him up, as we've agreed.

David Suchet *does so*: 'Your mind is tossing on the ocean,  
There where your argosies with portly sail,  
Like signors and rich burghers on the flood,  
Or as it were the pageants of the sea,  
Do overpeer the petty traffickers  
That curtsy to them, do them reverence,  
As they fly by them with their woven wings.'

Good. You kept a fine balance there between the heightened and the naturalistic elements. *Balance* between these ingredients is something which we're always looking for and we shall keep coming back to that word. The great thing was that the speech was much clearer to follow. And it sounded as natural, I would say, as anything that we like to call naturalistic in the theatre.

Ben Kingsley: *There's always a debate that rages in me whenever I find myself with a new text in a rehearsal room. It's the old debate between*

*naturalism and realism. It's a vital distinction. I find more and more when I am on stage that naturalistic acting, that is totally reported nature, is inappropriate. Because on stage one is in an environment that is by its very nature highly organised and concentrated. So naturalistic acting is a false exercise. On the other hand we mustn't forget that to the Elizabethan mind to be "gainst nature" or not natural was something profoundly disturbing. 'To hold the mirror up to nature' or 'to o'erstep not the modesty of nature' were maxims which told the actor to root himself in nature. But once he is so rooted, he must remember that his landscape as an actor, the play itself, is a compressed, organised, condensed version of the truth. Lear's whole destiny for instance unfolds in the space of an evening. That is not naturalistic. But an actor must be rooted in nature for the emotions to be contagious and real.*

Yes, the word 'naturalistic' is a jargon word for a particular style. We mean by it a style which deliberately gives an impression of ordinary everyday speech and behaviour. We don't mean it in the more general sense of 'being true to nature'.

Ben Kingsley: *Yes, it's a dangerous word and can be confusing. But I think if we're clear about what we mean by it then we're on much safer ground.*

Let's go back to the point we were making about balance. There has to be a balance between being seemingly natural on the one hand and coming to terms with the heightened language on the other. We've seen what happens if we do the Salerio speech totally naturalistically, and we've seen David do it with the kind of balance I am urging. Now let's be very unfair and see what happens if we go to the other extreme. Let's lose the naturalness and overplay the heightened language, because that's the other trap that we have to avoid.

David Suchet: *Ham it up a bit?*

Ham it up a bit.

David Suchet *does so*:

'Your mind is tossing on the ocean,  
There where your argosies with portly sail,  
Like signors and rich burghers on the flood,  
Or as it were the pageants of the sea,  
Do overpeer the petty traffickers  
That curtsy to them, do them reverence,  
As they fly by them with their woven wings.'

Well, you see why we talk about balance. To go solely for the heightened language is as dangerous as to plump totally for naturalism.

Mike Gwilym: *But there's a danger in all this, isn't there? It's so easy to laugh at overdoing the language. We're all so keen to avoid it that we often get into lunacies. We try to take the curse off heightened language by trying to prove that the text is really quite modern. We sometimes pepper a bit of heightened language with little, almost subliminal, modern tags. For instance, a line like 'The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne/Burned on the water' can all too easily become . . . 'Well, the barge she sat in like, like a . . . sort of . . . burnished throne . . . you know . . . burned on the water . . . ' If we're not careful we can do that without even being aware that we're doing it.*

I have some sympathy with an actor's instinct to do that. The trouble is that it distorts as much as ham does. That's why I stress, and will do so again and again, that we have to find a balance between those two extremes. In other words an actor in Shakespeare simply has to marry the two traditions of heightened language and naturalistic acting.

Ian McKellen: *I must confess I find it very difficult to draw a clear division between what you've called the Two Traditions. I'm sure you're fighting to define the difference between good acting and bad acting. As Ben has suggested, any play is going to be concerned with the playwright's organised view of the world and of the inner world of the characters we are playing. Every speech we utter, whether it's in a soap opera or by Shakespeare, is not going to be like speech in real life. So we always have the problem of coming to terms with the style of the writing. But I think the style of acting against which modern actors, of whatever generation they come from, rebel, is not so much the style of the writing as the style of the actors of the previous generation. And I suspect that actors from Richard Burbage, the man who first acted Shakespeare's heroes, right through to us today, have all been concerned with truth, reality and nature. It's just that we've all had different perceptions of it.*

*Our naturalism today is a reaction against the supposed naturalism of, let us say, the nineteenth century, where indeed the playing style was large, partly because the theatres were large. Partly too because in nineteenth-century England everything about the world seemed to be certain. The British Empire was going to last for a thousand years, and therefore Henry Irving could stand firmly on a stage in front of three thousand people and make declarations. We have a different perception of the world. Life is difficult, ambiguous and complicated. The British Empire doesn't exist any more. We ask ourselves, what is our role as a nation in the world and what is our role as people, as parents, as children? This tends to direct our attention into details and away from the big gestures.*

Well, of course I've been over-simplifying. What always happens when we

talk about acting is that we start to use labels to help us articulate something which is very hard to define. But as soon as I put a label forward, like the Two Traditions, and offer a definition, I know I have to qualify it because I am over-simplifying. Of course there's naturalistic text in lots of Elizabethan plays and there is heightened language in modern plays, but I still think that my general point is true. Actors are normally much more at home with a naturalistic text, because that's what they work on the most today. I simply want to stress that if they can act in such a way as to marry the two traditions and if they can get the balance right, then there's no question of the result being either too naturalistic or too this or too that. It will work, it will be real and it will be accepted.

Ben Kingsley: *We've been talking about finding a balance and bringing the two elements of naturalism and heightened speech together. But often Shakespeare achieves a dramatic effect by deliberately switching from the one element to the other.*

Absolutely. He does so in our example from *The Merchant of Venice*. Let's look at an extreme example and switch to another play for a moment. In *Othello* there are some violent switches between naturalistic and heightened language. Here is Othello when Iago has just convinced him that his wife is unfaithful.

OTHELLO (*Alan Howard*): I had been happy if the general camp,  
Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body,  
So I had nothing known. O, now, for ever  
Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!  
Farewell the plumed troops, and the big wars  
That make ambition virtue! O, farewell!  
Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trumpet,  
The spirit stirring drum, th'ear-piercing fife,  
The royal banner and all quality,  
Pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war!  
And, O you mortal engines, whose rude throats  
Th'immortal Jove's dread clamours counterfeit,  
Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone!  
IAGO (*Mike Gwilym*): Is't possible, my lord?

*Othello: III.3.*

Pretty telling, isn't it? That single short verse-line, 'Is't possible, my lord?' after all the colour and the richness that has gone before. Contrast, ringing the changes: Shakespeare does it over and over. It's true that a heightened speech may lift the emotional pressure of a scene, but it's also true that it may pave the way for something quite down-to-earth and simple which is even more telling. The one style enriches and sets off the other. Let's go back to *The Merchant* and take the scene a little bit further. Another character joins in the conversation, Solanio. This time, let's treat the scene as if it's the middle of a conversation which has been going on before the play begins.



ANTONIO (*Ian McKellen*): In sooth I know not why I am so sad.  
It wearies me, you say it wearies you;  
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,  
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,  
I am to learn;

And such a want-wit sadness makes of me  
That I have much ado to know myself.

SALERIO (*David Suchet*): Your mind is tossing on the ocean,  
There where your argosies with portly sail,  
Like signors and rich burghers on the flood,  
Or as it were the pageants of the sea,  
Do overpeer the petty traffickers

That curtsy to them, do them reverence,  
As they fly by them with their woven wings.

SOLANIO (*Ben Kingsley*): Believe me, sir, had I such venture forth,  
The better part of my affections would  
Be with my hopes abroad. I should be still  
Plucking the grass to know where sits the wind,  
Peering in maps for ports and piers and roads,  
And every object that might make me fear  
Misfortune to my ventures, out of doubt  
Would make me sad . . .

SALERIO: I know Antonio  
Is said to think upon his merchandise.

ANTONIO: Believe me, no: I thank my fortune for it  
My ventures are not in one bottom trusted,  
Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate  
Upon the fortune of this present year.

Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad.

SOLANIO: Why then you are in love.

ANTONIO: Fie, fie!

SOLANIO: Not in love neither? Then let us say you are sad  
Because you are not merry; and 'twere as easy  
For you to laugh and leap, and say you are merry  
Because you are not sad.

*Merchant of Venice: I.1.*

That was good. A lively, balanced mixture, heightened yet very real.

Sheila Hancock: *I notice you've been basically using one word to describe Salerio's richer language; that's 'heightened'. You haven't used the dread word 'poetic'.*

'Poetic'. Dread word indeed. I think it a dangerous word to use in the theatre because it's so general and imprecise. If you say to an actor, 'Do it poetically', I reckon alarm bells will ring in his head.

Sheila Hancock: *Well, it certainly frightens me.*

Lisa Harrow: *Don't you think poetry takes care of itself? I mean, if we*

*use all the things we've been talking about, then the language itself and our own spirit will express the poetry.*

Well, maybe sometimes. But I rather want to dodge the question of poetry here and to come to it much later on. Not because I think it's unimportant—with Shakespeare it is of course often all-important—but because I don't believe it is helpful to *begin* work on his text by thinking about it. An actor has first to tackle the problems we're talking about tonight. He has to get on top of the thoughts before he thinks about the tune. I am using the phrase 'heightened language' partly to put off the question of the poetry which I think in the end is the biggest challenge of all to an actor in Shakespeare; and partly because the coining of a simile or a metaphor or the choosing of a coloured adjective is not necessarily a poetic activity. I believe that the vague idea of 'the poetic' can lead an actor into troubled waters. It can lead to what I've called playing the quality or the mood and to putting a great big wash of lyricism or sentimentality over a speech. And above all it can lead to what we call 'generalising', playing a mood rather than specific thoughts or intentions.

I've deliberately started with a simple humdrum example, because I want to look at what goes on as the *norm* in Shakespeare. In our later sessions we will look at richer and more resonant bits of text. For now I just want to establish our main point. Playing Shakespeare is to do with marrying the two traditions. And in saying that I'm not suggesting that one's more important than the other. They are both vital.

Sheila Hancock: *But it makes sense to start with our own tradition, because that's what's inside us and it's what we know best.*

Yes, that's the heart of it. We have to start with the way we are and the way we think. But look. I think we've all been falling into a trap in this discussion and I have been the worst offender. We have been *generalising* about acting and using a lot of abstract terms. 'Intentions', 'tradition', 'naturalistic', 'real'. Such words can be helpful if we use them as tools but they will undo us if we elevate them into a philosophy. We shall start to go round in circles. Abstractions don't solve acting problems. Used in moderation they can help to clear the head but we can't finally use them to pin acting down. Sooner or later we have to look at specific bits of text and seek particular solutions. I must confess that I personally find it hard and uncongenial to talk about acting in conceptual terms. But when an actor stands on his feet and begins to bring a particular passage to life then I begin to respond and sense what to say. We must hold on to that in these workshops. Our gods must not be concepts but the words that are in the text. We must keep looking at individual passages as we've begun to do this session, and we must ask what goes on in them. And in doing so we must trust our instincts and our experience. That's why I have put the

Elizabethan tradition second, though most of the sessions that follow will be taken up with trying to get in touch with that tradition. So, I repeat, marrying the two traditions: it's an idea that we will keep coming back to.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Using the Verse

### *Heightened and Naturalistic Verse*

[The following actors took part in the programme that forms the basis of this chapter: SINEAD CUSACK, SHEILA HANCOCK, LISA HARROW, ALAN HOWARD, JANE LAPOTAIRE, IAN McKELLEN, PATRICK STEWART, DAVID SUCHET, MICHAEL WILLIAMS.]

In the first session I suggested that the main problem in playing Shakespeare is how to marry the Elizabethan text and acting tradition with our modern acting tradition. There were two other important points. First, that the heightened language in a text has to be found by the actor and not just taken for granted. And secondly, that a right balance has to be found between the naturalistic and heightened elements in that text.

But most of Shakespeare's plays are also in verse, or else very often in heightened rhetorical prose. Blank verse is probably the very centre of the Elizabethan tradition and perhaps the most important thing in Shakespeare that an actor has to come to terms with. Or rather I should say that an actor *needs to get help from*. I stress that because many actors, particularly if they're not familiar with Shakespeare, very understandably look at the verse as some kind of threat. They know they will somehow come to grief if they ignore it or be chastised if they do it wrong. It becomes a mountain to be climbed or else an obstacle to be avoided. But no, it's there to help the actor. It's full of little hints from Shakespeare about how to act a given speech or scene. It's stage-direction in shorthand. So let's try to find out how his verse *works*. Don't let's ask what it *is*, for it's nothing static, but let's ask what goes on in it. Shakespeare was an actor, and I believe that his verse is above all a device to help the actor. It doesn't necessarily or inevitably have something to do with poetry, though of course it often does. But at the beginning we can forget that. How do you all think that it helps you as actors?

Alan Howard: *It helps us to learn the lines. Verse is usually easier to learn than prose.*

Jane Lapotaire: *It makes a pattern on the page which is easier for the mind to retain than prose.*