John Russell Brown

Learning Shakespeare's Secret Language: the Limits of 'Performance Studies'

As author of one of the pioneering books advocating the study of *Shakespeare's Plays in Performance* (1966), founder of the Department of Drama and Theatre Arts at Birmingham University, and for fifteen years an Associate Director of the Royal National Theatre, John Russell Brown is in a uniquely authoritative position to look back over the intervening years as 'Performance Studies' have increasingly displaced the study of Shakespeare's plays as texts. But has this been as helpful as many, including the author, hoped, when in practice it is so often based on the second- or third-hand recreation of lost and isolated theatrical moments, and fails entirely to give a sense of the progressive experience of watching a play? John Russell Brown here argues for closer attention to what he calls the 'secret language' of the plays – implicit instructions to actors that are buried in the texts themselves, at a time when there was no director to encourage or impose a particular interpretation or approach. He concludes: 'Rather than trying to describe and understand what very different people have made of the plays in very different circumstances and times, we can best study them in performance by allowing them to reflect our own lives.' John Russell Brown's most recent books are *Shakespeare Dancing* (Palgrave, 2005) and, as editor, *The Routledge Companion to Directors' Shakespeare* (2008). In 2007 he was appointed Visiting Professor at University College London.

SOMEONE MUST blow a whistle to stop the game because studies of Shakespeare's plays in performance have added little to our understanding of the texts. They tend to be limited and small scale, looking at moments that can be described and telling us no more than how one particular actor or director has made the incident meaningful or unusually interesting. Other studies are about a production's stage design or a director's concept. None of these tell us much about Shakespeare's plays because the scholars and critics are not considering what happens in an entire production, what is the progressive experience of the audience during a performance, or what has permanent value beyond the context of one particular performance that is now dead beyond recall. I am blowing a whistle because I have come to question the worth of much that I have written in the past[1] and of many studies by scholars and critics whose learning and skills surpass my own.

During the last century a succession of highly regarded authors have argued that Shakespeare's plays should be studied and appraised in performance because they were expressly written to be acted in a theatre. Their rallying cries were urgent and so often repeated that echoes can still be heard today, but the anticipated revolution and revelation never arrived. At the 2008 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America not one 'paper session' about theatrical performance was announced and only two or, possibly, three out of thirty-nine seminars were to be concerned with this branch of study. Papers for the International Shakespeare Conference at Stratford-upon-Avon in August 2008 were not announced far in advance, but among the nine seminars on offer at the beginning of the year only two held any promise of considering performance and neither of these would centre on the study of a play or plays in the theatre. Seminar members were offered an extension, as if some issue other than performance was needed to make the topic respectable: one will be concerned with critical theory in general, the other will take recent neurological research into account and also classical oratory.

Experience has exposed the difficulties of studying Shakespeare's plays in the theatre.

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Many productions are inadequately cast or hurriedly prepared, not worth serious study. The more persuasive performances find new meanings for the text, invent new stage business, and often tell the tale differently: how can track be kept of all this activity and which productions merit close attention? Many writers, including my younger self, have been so pleased with theatrical moments – the crumbs that fall from great performances – that we have scrambled to catch them, taking hold of one after another and claiming what an interesting meaning, association, or visual statement we have pulled out of the production. But we have paid little attention to major elements of the audience's experience: to mood, sensation, expectation, satisfaction, and other less verbal elements of an audience's experience; or to visual impressions and movement on stage, to an actor's stage presence and how it changes as the action unfolds; or to where and how, and with what purpose, the production had been created.

Limitations of 'Performance Studies'

'Performance Studies' has become established as a branch of scholarship and higher education but, because research in this subject is not primarily concerned with play texts, Shakespeare scholars have paid little attention.[2] This new field of study ought to be able to teach us how to analyze performances and show how they contribute to an audience's experience but, instead of following this new lead, Shakespeare scholars have continued to describe what is said and done on stage at certain moments in a performance as if that were all they could achieve.

Theatrical performances will always be difficult to describe and analyze, and performances of a play by Shakespeare more so than most. Even now, after years of persistent research and reflection, scholars seldom view performances objectively or scientifically, but depend on little that is more reliable than their own instinctive, textual, or historical judgement of a number of striking moments. Evidence about past performances is seldom reliable, so that critics have the additional problem of discriminating between different descriptions of a single moment as written by a number of experienced reviewers who were being paid to write interesting journalism rather than give full and accurate descriptions of what had happened in the theatre. Even a collection of careful observations about scattered moments could never explain how a performance held the attention of audiences. No moment has its complete meaning or effect alone, but is formed by its place in the progress of an entire performance and is viewed in contrast to other moments and in relation to whatever information the play has provided or withheld.

Similarly, an audience's experience of a play depends on every element of the 'theatrical event', including the predisposition and predilections of its members, the place, day, and time of performance, the organization, policies, and reputation of the producing company, and events taking place outside the theatre.[3] The audience's response influences performance and is also progressive, depending on a sequence of moments but developing a basic direction and cumulative force. A theatrical production lives – or dies – through its effect on an audience, and that should be an important part of any study of Shakespeare's plays in performance.

All these difficulties are compounded for Shakespeare's plays, which are performed long after composition without benefit of the author's guidance or stable theatrical conventions. As literature their speeches and, still more, their dialogue cannot always be readily or fully understood, while as 'play scripts', the written basis for rehearsal and performance, they make extraordinary demands on actors who live in a very different world to the one Shakespeare knew.

Their action is varied in mood and complexity, one moment calling for many actors and the next for one or few; moments of quiet are followed by sustained speech, half-formed sentences or inchoate cries; stillness, intimacy, formality, or restraint is followed by activity that must be free, urgent, brutal, or widely dispersed. In production, Shakespeare's plays are notable for the variety of ways in which they have been staged and for

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an actor's ability to spring surprises when creating the persons of the play and speaking its words.

Any theatre production has interest for scholars because it must go beyond the play text and has involved actors who move and breathe; but those scholars who are studying Shakespeare's plays should ask whether its actors serve the story as it unfolds, whether any effect originates in Shakespeare's words as well as in the mental and physical contribution of the actors, and how much is due to the director or the designers of set, costume, sound, and lighting. When, many years ago, critics called for Shakespeare's plays to be studied in performance they were setting a huge task for which no one has had sufficient time and expertise.

Some Approaches to Performance

The revised edition of Julia Hankey's *Othello* in the 'Shakespeare in Production' series (Cambridge University Press, 2005) gathers details and quotations about moments in the play as if they were collectible curios or odd pebbles taken from the seashore. They are printed as annotations along with the full text so that a reader can see where they belong, but little help is given to relate these moments to the ongoing action or to the development of individual performances, that alone could ensure an adequate account of the performance and progressive experience of an audience. Variety seems to be prized over suitability to the text. Here, for example, is Othello's return to the stage to encounter Iago in Act III, Scene iii:

> Kean 'entered with the abrupt and wandering step of one to whom the grace or dignity of motion were new things, and swallowed up in the fearful bewilderings of a heavy heart' (*T*, 14 May 1814). Salvini 'seems to enter as if his inner soul is red-hot . . he suffers not only mentally but physically also' (Stanislavski, *My Life*, p. 271). Olivier returned sniffing his fingers 'as if they were tainted by contact with [Desdemona's] body' (Tynan, *National Theatre Production*, p. 8). John Kani sobs and groans in the Suzman video. (p. 209)

In this form of study, much depends on the impression made on individual observers, except where a film, video, or document can be cited to verify the facts of what happened: for example, 'Nunn's Bianca sniffed the handkerchief here (promptbook)' or 'In the video, Imogen Stubbs [as Desdemona] giggles again' (p. 227, 258).

When critics and scholars study a production that they have seen – often a single performance of that production – the same isolating and diminishing factors are at work. Catching an impression or an innovation needs close observation and tends to keep out of the reckoning its effect on an entire performance or production. Almost always it is associated with what is novel in costume, stage business, or the 'reading' of a particular line of text.

Reviews in academic journals furnish many examples. They crowd, for instance, into Michael Dobson's four to five thousand words in *Shakespeare Survey 60* (2007) about the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Antony and Cleopatra* of the previous year – here, in descriptions of Patrick Stewart's Antony:

> [At the start] a smirking bare-chested figure in white harem trousers holding an ornate leather whip comes dashing stealthily up through the front stalls. . . .
>
> He decides his overall battle-plan at Actium . . . in mid-sentence: 'Candidus, we / Will fight with him by . . . [*slightly extending this monosyllable while he looks upward as if mentally tossing a coin*] . . . sea' (III.vii.27–8).
>
> For the encounter with Thidias in III.xiii, . . . he is filled with all the neurotic energy of complete despair, displaying a ranting, twitching state of alternating reckless bravado and unbearable self-loathing . . .
>
> Sending his angry challenge to single combat, he is on the edge of complete incoherence, scarcely able to hold the shape of a whole sentence in his mind . . . (p. 294–5)

The play in performance is reduced to a number of incidents in which the actor's or director's invention is as notable as any response to the text being acted. The audience's progressive experience of the entire play is seldom the critic's main concern, nor is the presentation of general themes that are inscribed in the text, such as history, individual

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consciousness, loyalty or responsibility, power politics, military heroism, warfare, nationalism, ethnicity, fate, supernatural agencies, superstition . . .

In response to performances of Shakespeare, a scholarly critic tends to make each production a test for the principal actors. This emphasis is most useful when a comparison is made with performances by other actors and attention paid to the final cumulative effect. Here, for example, is Robert Smallwood in *Shakespeare Survey 53* (2000):

> Zoë Waites' Desdemona [was] a proud, strong-minded young woman in her smart Mrs Pankhurst suits, perfectly capable of the 'downright violence' of the decision she had made, as uninhibited in her physical desire for him as he for her. Some Desdemonas have seemed more vulnerable, but the great benefit of this interpretation was to present the relationship between Othello and Desdemona as absolutely reciprocal and fully self-aware, its destruction a terrible undertaking. (p. 256)

Kinds of Questioning

When a school edition follows this mode of study, it quotes numerous opinions, asks questions, points out 'problems', gives instructions for practical explorations, and may add photographs to its text, all of which, presented side by side with the text, result in a rich but bewildering brew. Following half the suggestions and clues could take months of endeavour; for example, the *Cambridge School Shakespeare* edition of *Romeo and Juliet* (3rd ed., 2005) prints four notes about the first fifteen lines of Act IV, Scene iv, organized under four headings, three of them ending with question marks:

> Angelica – is that the Nurse's name?
> Who speaks the lines?
> Husband and wife – a distrustful relationship?
> Watching.

The Sourcebooks Shakespeare (Sourcebooks, USA, 2005, and A. & C. Black, London, 2007) poses fewer questions but provides rather more photographs and comes with an audio CD of twenty 'classic scenes'.

Study of 'Shakespeare in Performance' in universities, as well as schools, is in danger of too much industry and too many dislocated and personal observations for any well-grounded view of a play's theatrical possibilities to emerge. Marvin Rosenberg's large compilations about the major tragedies, published from the nineteen-seventies onwards, were to become models for this mode of study.[4] He set himself to consider every account he could unearth of what had been seen and heard on stage before recording those he thought were of most interest, sometimes adding his own comments on their effectiveness and validity as a representation of Shakespeare's text. Here is his account of the entry of Lady Macbeth for Act III, Scene i:

> Siddons felt burdened:
>
> > The golden round of royalty now crowns her brow and royal robes enfold her form; but the peace that passeth all understanding is lost.
>
> Siddons armed herself in dignity. With other Ladies the stress would show more. Ziegler tried to hide her torment behind a smiling mask, but a German observer saw the muscles of her face resisting her intentions, cramping her face, half-closing her eyes. Faucit's first splendid, aggressive power seemed to desert her under her golden crown; she seemed heart-stricken. Ristori, for all her control, projected an awareness that their new power was not secure, her attention dividing between the court and a distant fate she listened for. Modjeska walked like one in a dream. Modjeska's sensitivity had long ago surfaced; the neurotic [Diana] Rigg had, until the murder discovery, been impassive in her control, now what was insecure and fragile beneath it showed:
>
> > She looks desiccated, broken, and walks like an old woman, intermittently emerging from self-absorption to present . . . a grin the more ghastly for the rouge she has hopefully daubed on her sunken cheeks.[5]

Rosenberg's book was well received, but today it may be seen as a tombstone to set upon one way of studying Shakespeare's plays in performance. This passage alone raises large questions. Why did this scholar choose these productions to record? Would any other dozen show as much or more, and the next dozens following them? How did he choose these descriptions in preference to others by other spectators? How do these moments function in the rest of the production: did

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these performances contrast or collude with others in other major roles or with the work of the entire theatre company? What else was seen on stage or heard at the same time? This way of studying Shakespeare's plays can never be complete or completely reliable.

Alternatively, a scholar will choose a comparatively small number of varied productions and give impressions of their overall effect, either gleaned from reviews or experienced at first hand in the theatre; interviews are often used to explain how the performances came about. These studies are chiefly valuable for demonstrating the range of interpretations that directors and designers have given to the texts, but a sense of the play in performance is rarely communicated because much of the available space is needed to describe a number of discrete productions and explain the directors' concepts and the meanings conveyed by the stage settings.

Retrieving a Sense of the Past

At their best, studies of the plays combine these two approaches. Antony Dawson's account of Michael Benthall's 1948 production of *Hamlet* in the 'Shakespeare in Performance' series (Manchester University Press, 1995) repeatedly relates Paul Scofield's playing of Hamlet to the progress of the plot, action, and production (p. 128–31) – for example, at the end, 'despite the bloodshed . . . his death was quiet and noble'. But the emphasis then returns to the director's invention and concept, by noting how an unnamed page wept in 'in a mutual silence . . . a wordless but eloquent chorus' (p. 131–2).

The difficulties of retrieving a sense of performance from the past are fully recognized in this book:

> I am engaged in reconstructing the meanings generated by past performances of a text that makes the play of meaning one of its primary subjects. And 'reconstruction' is itself a slippery process, since it depends on documentary sources, such as reviews and prompt books, that are themselves culturally mediated. The result is an approximation that I want to make accurate, but which itself derives from a constraint associated with the responsibility of writing a book like this one – the need to produce a meaningful narrative, to offer more than just a lot of loose details to my readers. (p. 3)

The difficulty of studying Shakespeare's plays in performance is even greater than that because without the context of the theatre building and equipment, the theatre company and its organization and history, the occasion and location of performance, and the actors' earlier careers, training, rehearsals, stage presence, and personal achievements, a theatrical event cannot be fully described and appreciated. The moment in time and in the history of a nation and society will also have influenced the performance and its audience's response.

The effect of these critical and scholarly difficulties on the study and teaching of Shakespeare's plays has been complex, confusing, and often dispiriting. Yet from the struggle a new reason for studying performances of Shakespeare's plays has been identified and has inspired a number of cultural and sociological studies. Journalistic accounts of performance and descriptions of innovative settings, concepts, and 'readings' can help to identify the spirit of the times, the vision of a director, or the effect of living in a technologically adventurous age.

The evidence is scattered, biased, and incomplete, but students of culture and society are practised in the use of statistics, histories, and individual observations. What has become of Shakespeare's play texts in the theatre may be no more than one straw in the wind of change, but it provides an exceptionally detailed and illuminating insight into wide reaches of culture and society, and one that is entertaining and informative to encounter.

Robert Shaughnessy's *The Shakespeare Effect: a History of Twentieth-Century Performance* (Palgrave, 2002) tells the story of Shakespeare's plays in performance 'because it offers a way of seeing cultures' (p. 194):

> My concern is not just with what happened in the places and at the moments in time . . . but with how the exchanges between texts, spaces, and bodies might have conveyed meanings above or beneath those apparently contained within the

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remit of Shakespeare. The divers appropriations charted in this study are examined less for their success in realizing the Shakespearean dream than as compelling evidence of the theatre's productive capacity for misreading, for accidents, coincidences, mistakes, and for failure. The tendency for performance to fall short of (or move beyond) its official function might be considered its fundamental weakness, but for my current purposes it is its greatest virtue. (p. 14)

What happens on stage in a performance stems, at base, from the conditions of production, the lives of those engaged in it, and the mood and ideas that are in the air. At the time these influences are hard to discern but, viewed from a distance and years later, their effect and potency become more apparent.

Recently a group of critics has been investigating the cultural interest of Shakespeare's plays in performance, 'both at the first and now', and from many viewpoints at home and across the world. Barbara Hodgdon's 'Bride-ing the Shrew: Costumes that Matter' (*Shakespeare Survey 60*, 2007) shows that how the clothes the text requires Shakespeare's Katharine to wear express the culture and social mores of his time and, in new productions, those of our own generation:

Kate's clothes – those worn by [Alexandra] Gilbreath and by other Kate-actors – play with the most serious theme of human, and theatrical, consciousness – *Who am I?* – to perform the double dream of identity and play which lies at the heart of *Shrew*'s theatrical self-fashioning. (p. 72)

Douglas Lanier's *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (Oxford, 2002) is one of a growing number of books showing how plays have migrated into forms of expression, performance, and consumption which their author could never have imagined. In cultural studies the plays themselves are not the main focus of attention.

Finding the Play's 'Secret Language'

Old questions call for new answers:

If scholars and critics seek a better understanding of Shakespeare's plays, why should they study how individual actors have enacted their roles?

The distinctive nature of an actor's achievement will depend on talent and earlier experience as much as on the play text; and each performance will be influenced by the occasion and the response of an audience, both of which are temporary, hard to describe, and harder still to relate to either text or performance. The actor may be skilled and imaginative, but neither quality derives from the play being performed and may be surpassed or at least superseded by the next person to take the role. Studying an actor's performance will reveal much about the actor and the theatrical event in which he or she is involved but little about the permanent and authorial qualities embodied in the play text.

Why is a past performance worth studying when we have no direct and unmediated evidence about it?

A description and critique of an earlier performance, however incomplete or inaccurate, can extend what we are able to visualize when studying a play text. No one is able to see a well-mounted and inspired performance of a play by Shakespeare any day of the week or year, but evidence about a number of past performances will establish a wide range of possible enactments; it may also spur us on to imagine other ways of staging and acting the play that would reflect and illuminate life at the present time.

How useful for studying Shakespeare's plays are present-day performances?

Talented and experienced actors can reveal possibilities in the texts that otherwise we might not expect. Although our best theatre experiences will be ephemeral, hard to recall or record, and less open to scrutiny than a play text, when we *see* almost any production we actually experience the play consecutively as the story unfolds, which is how Shakespeare expected plays to be received.

One response to all these questions is to cut through the temporary features of performance and concentrate on what can be learnt about the heart of the matter: what Shake-

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speare wanted to be on stage and what, moment by moment, the speaking of his dialogue requires from any actor.

Numerous cues can be found in the texts that make demands on actors, and a reader can seek these out and begin to respond imaginatively to their physical and vocal requirements. By learning to read what may be called this 'secret' language in the texts, a reader can begin to visualize what might happen onstage and experience in the mind a representation of tangible lived experience. Only actors can provide this in performance onstage but every reader has the imagination and experience of living that can be used to respond to a play text as if it were being performed. If alert to Shakespeare's secret theatrical language, any reader can also begin to respond as a member of an audience.

The only practicable way of studying a play in performance – rather than individual performances – is to use ourselves as actor and audience, being conscious of our limitations but bringing to the task whatever we have experienced of both theatre and life, and in our imaginations. In those plays that stage or refer to the acting of a play, Shakespeare identified imagination as the agent whereby a text comes alive in the actors' performances and in the minds of an audience.[6] Individual members of an audience respond according to what they have done in real life.[7] Such an open and varied response is not usually associated with rigorous scholarship and, as a glass through which to view Shakespeare's plays, it is obviously limited and peculiar to each one of us, but that is only appropriate to the way Shakespeare wrote for theatrical performance.

Inscribed in the texts, then, is a 'secret' language that needs to be decoded to reveal the numerous cues for the performances that Shakespeare had in mind. Individually they can seem insignificant, but they are constant ingredients in all the plays that can shape performances and help to form an audience's instinctive response. Responsible research should study this theatrical language with as much diligence and imagination as the words to be spoken. Actors should use it as they use the dialogue and create their performances by bending its cues to their individual imaginations and talents.

Helping Readers to Become an Audience

The series of 'Shakespeare Handbooks' published by Palgrave Macmillan (2005 and continuing to date) provides commentaries that note what the words tell actors to *do*, both individually and together, as they speak the text and are involved in the unfolding story and ever-changing onstage events.[8] The author for each play has attended rehearsals or a series of performances and uses that experience to explicate the theatrical directions embedded in its text. Each commentary is prefaced by an account of the origins of the text or texts and followed by a presentation of three or four landmark productions to give an impression of some well-executed and very different enactments. Other chapters deal with the original context of the play, both social and cultural, influential film versions, and critical appraisals. These books are written for student use, but depend on original research into the theatrical language of the texts that also serves scholars who wish to study Shakespeare's plays in the theatrical context for which they were written.

The play texts do not require actors to conform to one authoritative staging of the plays but allow them to develop their performances in ways best suited to their individual talents and imagination. A lifetime would be needed to consider every way of acting and staging a Shakespeare play, but to study what is, unequivocally, in the text for actors to use is a much more attainable task. The 'Handbook' commentaries set out to do just that by replicating the actors' encounters with the text of a play so that readers are helped to bring the play to life in their own minds, as if it were on a stage. The shared response of a company of actors is harder to envisage, but the progressive experience of an audience can be taken into account more fully than in other forms of study.

Some of the 'Handbook' authors give special attention to narrative and exposition, noting the handling of entries and exits and

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the changes of attention they bring. When the dialogue gives the necessary information, an audience can become fully aware of what is about to happen and watch for its effect; when little or nothing is explained, it will be surprised, perplexed, kept waiting for enlightenment, or made aware that some unknown force has taken the play's story forward.

Certain questions recur: what does an audience need to know or not wish to recognize? When is an audience taunted or when made thoroughly unsettled in mind? Why does a person in the play say this now and not earlier, and why in this way? Why does an entry or exit happen at this particular moment? Is an entry or exit at speed or unhurried, with a stated purpose or without any particular intent? To these and other practical questions an actor needs answers and, very often, those can be found in the text and when acted upon both affect performance and determine the response of an audience. Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Osric in *Hamlet* are examples of characters whose intentions are not fully known on first entry and concerning whom a commentary can show the steps by which an audience's curiosity is aroused and ultimately satisfied, in the process illuminating what Hamlet says are the 'villainies' and 'things rank and gross' in Claudius's Denmark (V, ii, 29, and I, ii, 136).

In moments of silence, marked by incomplete verse lines, broken syntax, or a sudden halt in speech, the actor must find other means than speech to hold an audience's attention: stage presence becomes impressive or, perhaps, some gesture or movement. Holding or relinquishing the lead in dialogue also sets problems that actors must answer wordlessly, by turning away or some involuntary sound, laughter, or exclamation; sometimes a lessening or heightening of the actor's mental awareness is sufficient to alert an audience's attention.

In all these ways response to performance changes: comprehension is challenged or clarified; small physical actions, coming together and interplaying with speech, make a potent contribution to the play, as many threads become a rope or a number of words a sentence. If we wish to respond to a play text as if in performance, small actions (turning the head, hand movements, stiffening the body) and small words (conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns, negatives, incoherent sounds) all contribute to what is happening, by a change of meaning, speed, emphasis, or relationships, and become highly significant elements of the drama.

References to the time of day, season of the year, the weather, or a change of location are not only matters of a moment but influence the acting and tone of an entire scene until further change is signalled. So, too, a stage property, the persons onstage, or what happened in the preceding scene may contribute to the effect and meaning of any moment without anything said taking note of this. Nothing in a play exists alone, and to grasp a single moment of performance or understand even a short speech may call for an accumulation of information. Events that come naturally when watching a play in the theatre will be lost in reading unless the reader is constantly aware of Shakespeare's secret theatrical language and the effect of seeing and hearing a performance.

The Progressive Experience

Attention paid to an audience's progressive experience – the slow building of response towards the play's conclusion – is an element of Shakespeare's writing that can best be studied in a continuous commentary that gives attention not only to meaning and intention but also to underlying sensations, changes in the focus of attention, recurrence of ideas, physical gestures, or groupings; to the moments when silent sensation is more dominant than verbalized meaning, intention, or physical effort; and to the times when clarity, strength, ease, wonder, simplicity, fear, pleasure, laughter, grief, or pride, are established or withdrawn.

Considered as isolated phenomena these may have little weight or importance compared with the speaking of Shakespeare's text, but they are present and instantly accessible to all audience members because, unlike many speeches and quick interchanges of

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dialogue, little or no special knowledge is needed to respond to them. The cumulative effect of something apparently so simple as an actor's physical presence on stage can influence every other ingredient of performance and stay in the mind when the play is done; this is not easy to describe and will vary with each change in casting or the accidents of each performance.

To deal with elements of the plays that cannot be explained by quoting the text, some 'Handbook' authors draw upon discussions with actors or workshops that explore Shakespeare's choice of words, questioning what they mean and seeking appropriate punctuation and phrasing for metre and clarity. Others reflect many hours of rehearsal during which actors have discovered how to speak their words as if they are necessary to the persons they play or have found appropriate silent responses as the situation changes and the story moves onwards.

Some authors will have watched and listened as actors and director decide when, if ever, the play should replicate life, or when and how it should re-create life in a more amazing and meaningful form. They will have seen how, together, actors develop full performances and shape what is happening so that it holds attention and continues to develop an audience's understanding. The objective is not to describe an authoritative performance – there can be no such thing – but to explicate the secret theatrical language of the text and help readers to hear and see what could happen on stage.

As a substitute for searching in reviews and piecing together an account of past performances, a study of the theatrical implications of Shakespeare's dialogue – its secret language – brings direct contact with the play as written for performance. By theatregoing or presence at rehearsals or workshops, a student will soon discover how much is open to reinterpretation and some of the means whereby this variation is achieved. Armed with this experience and an active imagination, a reader of a text with its 'Handbook' commentary alongside can set the play in action in the mind's eye and start to develop an appropriately sensuous, intelligent, and progressive response. This imaginary performance is bound to be limited in effect and clarity, but it will have been created in close association with the words that Shakespeare used to guide his actors and give theatrical form to his imagination and sense of life around him.

A Theatrical Form of Study

The 'Handbooks' were designed for student use, and that will remain their primary purpose, but in writing them their authors have been developing a new form of study for Shakespeare's plays in performance that is not based on what particular actors have done in the past but on a close scrutiny of the texts for their theatrical potential. This approach is in accord with Elizabethan theatre practice because, in the absence of a director, there was no alternative to accepting what the individual actors made of the dialogue: Shakespeare must have written accordingly and developed a language that was as theatrical as it was verbal.

Risk was involved, because much could go wrong in these conditions, but, by offering this freedom to actors, Shakespeare produced texts that have drawn highly skilled actors to perform them and audiences to see them in many different countries over the course of four hundred years. When twenty or more 'Handbooks' have been published and can be compared, it should be possible to write a grammar for what has here been called Shakespeare's 'secret' theatrical language and to frame a pattern of study that respects the openness of the texts and illuminates their characters, themes, spectacle, narrative, and action.

Shakespeare's plays would be much easier to study if they could be considered as works of literature, but they were not written to function in that way. Lukas Erne's *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) has recently argued that Shakespeare positively wanted readers for his plays and, in the first instance, wrote accordingly, but here the wish seems to have been father to the thought. No evidence exists to show that Shakespeare encouraged or aided

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publication in book form: he neither visited the printers to help with press corrections as did Ben Jonson, John Webster, and perhaps others, nor did he write dedications or commend his own works to readers, as did Jonson, Webster, Barnaby Barnes, John Fletcher, Thomas Heywood, John Marston, Philip Massinger, and Thomas Middleton. If Shakespeare cared about non-theatrical readers, he took none of several options open to him that would help to secure them. Nor does anything suggest that he tried to stop publication of imperfect texts, although the acting company almost certainly did at the start of his career while his name was rapidly gaining recognition.

Lukas Erne argues that because several published texts are too long to be staged in the regular way of theatre, Shakespeare must have had literary appreciation in mind; but he forgets that dramatists, poets, novelists, as well as almost anyone who seeks the best verbal expression of thoughts and sensations, will over-write the earliest drafts before cutting what is unnecessary or does not pull its weight. Such early versions would be the manuscripts that, in Shakespeare's day, the players could most easily spare and so might not guard as carefully as others.

After Shakespeare's death his fellow actors, John Heminge and Henry Condell, considered it wise, in a preface to the 1623 collected edition of his plays, to tell readers who had failed after several readings to 'understand' the plays, to get help from persons who could. As literature they are not always easy to read, but Shakespeare was writing for performance not, primarily, for readers. Today no dramatist writes dialogue of such complexity and subtlety, and yet Shakespeare and more than one of his contemporaries had sufficiently trusted the actors' intelligence that they dared, as Thomas Nashe put it, 'to repose eternity in the mouth of a player'.[9]

Once it is studied, learned by heart, and has become part of an actor's fully engaged performance, Shakespeare's dialogue – that is by turns lyrical, persuasive, grand, sensuous, sensational, subtle, simple, and often has several different meanings – can seem like the natural idiom of the speaker: Shakespeare wrote his plays for actors to perform and it is in performance that they are most readily appreciated and understood.

To Reflect Our Own Lives

What then must be done if the plays are to be studied in performance? First, we must be patient and seek help from each other and from specialists in related disciplines. Perhaps above all we should strive to take the whole play into account and consider the progressive experience of audiences. Rather than relying on reviews of performances, we should go to the text and ask ourselves what it demands of actors, directors, and designers. Failure to heed this 'secret' theatrical language in a play is as eccentric in performance as a production that, without good reason, leaves out significant passages of dialogue. Seeing the plays in almost any performance can always be instructive but, as scholars and students, we should not hesitate to engage theatrically with a play on our own account.

Study must reach beyond what individual actors and the temporary business of theatre can effect, and beyond and behind what a director and designers have added to the production. In time, a grammar, glossary, or dictionary of Shakespeare's theatrical language might be compiled to help when reading an unfamiliar play or making a start on theatrical study. Because study of theatre is so exceptionally difficult and can involve all branches of study, students and scholars whose primary interest is in Shakespeare's plays should seek the performance potential of the texts regardless of the conditions and context in which they have been performed.

Any interest, authority, or force that a performance can have will be temporary, as all theatrical events are temporary and unrepeatable: the text alone has permanent value, deriving from the author and capable of affecting all elements of performance, both words and action, time and space, actors and audience. Ironically, when study concerns itself with Shakespeare's plays in performance on a stage, rather than as literature on a

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page, it is all the more necessary to turn back to the texts and discover, through their secret theatrical language, those elements of performance which the author had in mind as he wrote. From this base it should be possible to build an impression of the theatrical life the plays could have in any context and at any time. Rather than trying to describe and understand what very different people have made of the plays in very different circumstances and times, we can best study them in performance by allowing them to reflect our own lives.

Notes and References

1. For example, *Shakespeare's Plays in Performance* (Arnold, 1966; Penguin, 1969; revised ed., Applause, 1993).

2. An exception is W. B. Worthen, but his interests are critical theory and history rather than Shakespeare's achievement in play scripts, as the titles of his books indicate: *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 1997) and *Shakespeare and the Force of Modern Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

3. See *Theatrical Events: Borders, Dynamics, Frames*, ed. Vicky Cremona *et al.* (Amsterdam: Ropodi, 2004), especially Hans van Maanen's 'How Contexts Frame Theatrical Events' and its diagrams that show the many elements of a theatrical event and their relationship to performance (p. 243–77).

4. *The Masks of King Lear* (University of California Press, 1972), in 431 pages, was followed by even ampler volumes in the same format.

5. *The Masks of Macbeth* (University of California Press, 1978), p. 388.

6. See 'It must be your imagination . . . ' (*Midsummer Night's Dream*, V, i, 209–14), and 'On your imaginary forces work . . . ' (*Henry V*, Prologue, 18).

7. See 'That's good' and 'That's wormwood' (*Hamlet*, II, ii, 492; III, ii, 176).

8. As the instigator and general editor of this series I have described its purposes in a general preface and written the volumes on *Macbeth* (2005) and *Hamlet* (2006), to be followed in 2009 by another on *King Lear.* I am grateful to the authors of other volumes for what they have taught me about the plays in performance and how to study their life on a stage.

9. Preface to Robert Greene, *Menaphon* (1589); *Works*, ed. R. B. McKerrow (1905), III, p. 312.

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