Shakespeare For The Actor Handbook

A. General Observations

Shakespeare uses “heightened language” as opposed to naturalistic speech.

In Shakespeare, the word comes before, or expresses, the thought; in modern acting the thought comes before the word. Or put another way, in Shakespeare language creates character (the words tell you how to say it); on the contrary, in modern acting the general idea is that character determines language (you shape the words through your intention). Your job as a contemporary Shakespearean actor is to balance these two principles.

B. Reading the Text as an Actor

Each scene or passage should be prepared as follows as an actor:

1. First Reading – identify the action in the text and the roles and relationships of the characters – the given circumstances – the world of the play.

2. Second Reading – gloss the text in which you:
   a. Identify the correct pronunciation of all words, phrases, names
   b. Identify unfamiliar words, phrases, sentences
   c. Identify familiar words, phrases, sentences which have unfamiliar meanings
   d. Identify literary devices like similes, metaphors, alliteration, assonance, and antithesis
   e. Identify the most important or operative words in a line or phrase

3. Third Reading – paraphrase each line; then, write a synopsis of the text

4. Fourth Reading – the identification and analysis of stress patterns (called scansion). It consists of several tasks:
   a. Identify the text as blank verse, rhyme, or prose

70% of Shakespeare is written in blank verse. Blank verse is language written in rhythmic patterns that do not rhyme. The principal rhythmic pattern of blank verse in Shakespeare is iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter is a line pattern of verse consisting of five consecutive iambs. An iamb is a two syllable unit or beat consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable – *da dum da dum da dum da dum*. On rare occasions Shakespeare will use other forms of blank verse, such as tetrameter (four iambs per line of verse).
Several reasons are given for the use of blank verse in Shakespeare:

- It was the convention in Shakespeare’s day
- Plays were frequently written as poems, and the distinction between poet and playwright was not as clear as it is today
- It possesses a formality lacking in prose or ordinary speech. This formality is necessary for the outdoor stage and for performance in general.
- The rhythm of blank verse most closely approximates natural speaking patterns
- Pentameter is asymmetrical like everyday speech
- It can accommodate variations in patterns of speech and still retain its rhythmic function

10% of Shakespeare’s writing consists of rhymed verse. This usage is generally reserved for songs, lovers, and fairies, but it is also used for certain dramatic effects including scene transitions and endings (cf. Richard III I, 1:165-166; Hamlet III, 4:100-104). Rhyme can be in a number of variations, including couplets cross or alternating rhyme (four lines of verse in which the final syllables of lines one and three rhyme, as well as two and four).

20% of Shakespeare is written in prose (more frequent in his later plays), simply defined as speech or writing without a formal rhythmic structure. Prose is considered to be the language for the lower classes, and low comedy. But Shakespeare shifts from verse to prose for many reasons, including changes in the speaker’s intent or state of mind, a change in action or subject matter, tone, or mood.

b. Identify and analyze the stress patterns of verse, rhyme, and prose

1. What are the rhythmic patterns of the text? Do each of the iambs have equal levels of stress? What words appear to be more heavily accented? Identify the primary (strong) and secondary (weak) stresses. Clues: What are the natural stresses as in everyday speech? Identify long vowels or diphthongs (they usually count as strong stresses).

2. Is there Compression (contraction) of words? Expansion? Are there additional syllables?

3. Where are the grammatical pauses (comma, semicolon, colon, period)? (Grammatical pauses indicate pauses or places to breathe in the verse)

4. Where are end-stopped lines (lines which end with dramatic punctuation)?

5. Are there Shared Lines? (Two or more lines combined to make one line of verse; they usually indicate pace)

6. Are there any Short Lines?

7. Pay particular attention to the prefix “un”, and the negative “not”
c. Identify characteristics and variations of the sentence or line structure.

The following characteristics must be identified in the text:

1. Ellipsis – the deliberate omission of words from a sentence
2. Missing Auxiliaries – especially helping verbs
3. Syntax violation – improper word order (Shakespeare frequently reverses word order)
4. Reverse negatives (“Go not!”)
5. Incorrect grammar (for dramatic accuracy)

d. Identify variations in the stress patterns you have chosen for the text

1. Trochee – the opposite of the iamb – a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable
2. Feminine Foot – three syllables instead of two with the following pattern: Unstressed, stressed, unstressed
3. Spondee – two strongly stressed syllables back-to-back
4. Pyrrhic – two weakly stressed syllables back-to-back
5. The Anapaest – two unstressed syllables followed by a strong syllable

e. Identify other characteristics of the text as they impact speech and character

1. Identify the relationship between prose and verse in the text
2. Identify once again all of the antitheses in both the verse and prose

5. Fifth Reading – read the passage aloud and discover the sounds and textures made by the vowels and consonants, and what they suggest about character and action. Identify Accent Shifts --- words pronounced differently than in our speech (usually determined by the rhythm of the line).

6. Sixth Reading – Character Study

In addition to the identification of the given circumstances of the scene or monologue, you should:

a. Identify the objective (intention) or through-line of your character
b. Break the scene/monologue into beats or units
c. Identify the tactics which your character will use to reach his/her objective
RESOURCES

Dale Coye, *Pronouncing Shakespeare’s Words*
Alexander Schmidt, *Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary, Vols. I and II*
C.T. Onions, *A Shakespeare Glossary*

John Barton, *Playing Shakespeare* (Chapters 2-4 recommended)

Websites

shakespeare-online.com – glossary, summaries, miscellaneous materials (Recommended)

folger.edu – homepage of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington D.C.; includes a complete database for research, study guides, lesson plans for teachers

bardweb.net

Shakespeare.palomar.edu

Oxford English Dictionary Database

For the OED online: Go to the Atkins Library Homepage
   Click on Jasmine
   Click on Databases
   Find Databases by Title at bottom of page,
      click on “O”
   Scroll down to Oxford English Dictionary

Helpful Texts

Bertram Joseph, *Acting Shakespeare*.
Joseph Olivieri, *Shakespeare Without Fear*.

Other Resources

John Crowther, ed., *No Fear Shakespeare: The Tempest*
Norrie Epstein, *The Friendly Shakespeare*
John Doyle and Ray Lischner, *Shakespeare For Dummies*.
Charles Boyce, *Shakespeare A to Z* (First Floor Reference in Atkins).
Laurie Rozakis, *Complete Idiot’s Guide To Shakespeare*. 