

## “Past the size of dreaming”: Chasing Mark Antony’s Shadow

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Two years ago, Ralph Alan Cohen gave me the opportunity to perform Mark Antony in his most cherished of Shakespeare’s tragedies, *Antony and Cleopatra* (no pressure, then), for the Baltimore-based Chesapeake Shakespeare Company. This summer, I will return to the play as Antony’s trusted general, Enobarbus, for Virginia Shakespeare Festival. So, when the ASC asked me to share my experiences of performing Antony for the *Playhouse Insider*, I positively leapt at the opportunity to indulge in a bit of reflection *and* projection. As I began to reminisce, however, nostalgia quickly turned to confusion, and then to paranoia. Amid the vivid memories of performing with wonderfully talented actors on balmy nights to appreciative audiences and mercifully few mosquitoes, my Antony “bestrid the ocean” like a ... a what? Searching through the memory stacks I couldn’t, I *can’t*, find him. I’m vaguely aware of his presence but I don’t see him. He’s a smudge in my mind’s eye; a silhouette against the Technicolor backdrop of the neoclassical ruins of the Patapsco Female Institute in Ellicott City, where we performed. It’s as if I’d walked through the performance like a shadow, or perhaps in pursuit of one.

Although perfectly plausible, neither of the two obvious diagnoses for this alarming lacuna -- early onset dementia and abject failure -- quite holds. While, like many professional actors, my overdeveloped short-term memory retains lines like water through a sieve, I pride myself on never forgetting a face, even if it’s one I only see in the dressing room mirror, and I can conjure the figures of twenty-five years of

past performances by recalling a gesture, a verbal tic, or even a smell. And while theatrical success resides just as much in the eye of the beholder, the residue of personal failure -- as painful flashes of my steampunk Romeo from the early Nineties sometimes remind me -- might be forgiven but are never quite forgotten. Yet *my* Antony obdurately resists conjuration and thereby avoids censure. I can't possibly judge how good or not I was when I can't recall what, or who, I was meant to be good at being.

As I grope to comprehend how this mighty figure could leave such shallow prints, I am reminded that Antony, beaten by Caesar and betrayed by Cleopatra, ponders much the same question. In a rare moment of introspection, he considers the evanescent, transformative nature of clouds (much as Hamlet does) that "mock our eyes with air" and melt upon inspection. "That which is now a horse," Antony tells his enfranchised slave, "even with a thought / The rack dislimns and makes it indistinct / As water is in water." Conceding that he possesses a persona as runny as a watercolor in the rain, Antony admits, "My good knave Eros, now thy captain is / Even such a body. Here I am Antony, / Yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave." Having made the cataclysmic choice to reject Caesar's sister Octavia for his Egyptian mistress, Antony's center, his "shape," cannot hold and, both figuratively and physically, he begins to fall apart.

The actor's job is to create that "visible shape" at the play's opening in order to dismantle it, often, with Shakespeare's tragic heroes, in quick order. And he uses the text's many indicators to furnish this initial image: what a figure says about himself and about others, how he says it, and what others say about him - character

lists, Stanislavsky terms them. But herein lies the problem, or, in actor parlance, the *challenge*. For Antony's lists are almost entirely comprised of statements rendered in the past tense that focus on radically different, sometimes opposing, aspects of Antony's declining reputation.

Confronted with his advancing years, Antony obsesses over his crumbling stature. Sounding suspiciously like a man confronting a mid-life crisis (or so I've been told), Antony declares his intent to live in the moment -- "Here is my space!" -- while at the same time rejecting pressing news from Rome: "Grates me! The sum." He clearly prefers the 'here' to the 'now,' for the present is poorer than the past and promises little by way of a future. "He at Philippi kept his sword e'en like a dancer, / While I struck the lean and wrinkled Cassius," he recalls bitterly of the "boy" Octavius Caesar, following the disastrous sea-fight at Actium, before concluding, "Yet now - no matter." Now, moment-by-moment, Antony is becoming immaterial, *non-matter*. Cleopatra, contemplating the vain hope of Octavius accepting Antony's challenge to single combat, captures the temporal crisis of a man caught out of time and running out of options: "Then Antony -- but now --. Well, on." She alone keeps a weather eye on the future.

Antony's tendency to fall back on his fading reputation as a soldier, a statesman, and a lover is largely supported by those around him, who judge him almost entirely by past renown rather than on present reality. The renegade Pompey's assessment of Antony's "soldiership [as being] twice the other twain" (Lepidus and Octavius) is little more than juvenile adulation, and Antony proves a pale imitation of the heroic commander remembered admiringly by Octavius for

beating a successful retreat across the Alps from Modena by drinking “the stale of horses.” Deaf to advice and reckless in bravery, his Herculean fury goaded only by taunts and jealousies, Antony succumbs to an ignominious defeat, a botched suicide, and a reputation “stroyed in dishonour,” his present behavior so egregious, he fears, as to rewrite history, as in *his* story. “The breaking of so great a thing should make / A greater crack,” laments Octavius upon hearing of Antony’s death, which clearly, he infers, made no great noise at all.

Although Antony remains capable of “Roman thought” and handles himself well enough in his summit with Octavius, we also see little of the great statesman and orator who rhetorically outmaneuvered and theatrically outperformed Brutus and Cassius in the Capitol. In Shakespeare’s main departure from Plutarch, the scholar E.A.J. Honigman once noted, “It is Cleopatra who rails and mocks, and Antony is always at the receiving end. [...] She laughs, he glooms.” The ostentatiously sensual ‘Asiatic’ speaking style Shakespeare created to distinguish Alexandrian from Roman seems better suited, and thus sounds more sublime, coming from Cleopatra than Antony, who moves us rather in moments of gruff simplicity: “Fall not a tear, I say; one of them rates / All that is won and lost. Give me a kiss.” Yet even these romantic utterances are strikingly rare. A mature couple past their salad days, they are more likely to bicker than to coo. Enobarbus, not Antony, offers the glorious paeon on Cleopatra arriving in her barge; Cleopatra fantasizes of her “demi-Atlas” only in his absence; and Antony frames their passion in the submissive terms of conquest: “Egypt, thou knew’st too well / My heart was to thy rudder tied by th’strings / And thou should’st tow me after”. As Peter Hall told a fretful Anthony

Hopkins during rehearsals at the National in 1987, "I think he's past great feeling for her. He's like a dead man, talking of one who's alive."

While Hall perhaps overstates the case, for me his bold direction gets at the nub of the crisis that confronts every actor playing Antony. For how do you play a "dead man," the shadow of a former self, a pale imitation of a prestige personality that never really existed, or only as a fantasy? "Think you there was or might be such a man / As this I dreamt of?" the mourning Cleopatra asks Dolabella, one of the few decent Romans, who replies: "Gentle madam, no." Although she vociferously rejects his answer, her conceit damns the future actor: "t' imagine / An Antony were nature's piece 'gainst fancy, / Condemning shadows quite." And indeed, the play's production history is littered with condemnations by reviewers who found Antony too poetic (Edmund Kean) or too intellectual (Phillip Kemble); too stolid (Frank Benson) or too showy (Lawrence Olivier); too manly (Wilfred Walter) or too effeminate (Kyrle Bellew); too young (John Gielgud) or too old (Baliol Holloway); too large (Conway Terle) or too slight (Donald Wolfit); too lusty (Michael Redgrave) or just too damned English (Richard Johnson); and so on: a litany of disappointments.

Rather than finding fellowship in failure with these great actors, however, I want to suggest that disappointment is written into the DNA of this role; in every sense it's the *point* of the performance, for Antony is and must remain "past the size of dreaming." Everyone possesses their own vision of an Antony that fades on contact: Egyptians and Romans, directors and audiences, even, or especially, actors. Numerous times during rehearsal I caught myself thinking: "James Keegan would do

this bit well. And this.” If anyone can reach past the size of dreaming, it’s Keegan. We each have our image of Antony.