Drawing Shakespearean characters in black and/or white: conflicting methodologies in the contemporary rehearsal room.

In this paper, which considers the *theory* of Shakespearean character *in practice*, I ask whether directors and actors in American classical theater are increasingly compelled to adjudicate between competing conceptions of character discovery in the rehearsal room. After outlining the extremes of the "new formalists" versus the "old Method-ists," I interrogate the tensions inherent within recent efforts to marry the two traditions of classical and modern character acting. Referencing recent work with my graduate students, I then briefly evaluate how best, if it all, we might blend the black print of the text and the white space of the subtext in the construction of multifaceted personas that co-habit both the early modern and psychological conceptions of character.

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Picture the scene. A young actor -- me -- barely out of college, having landed the role of Romeo in a reputed northern repertory theater, faces off with a director, barely older than myself, but already a rising star in new works development at the Royal Court. The crisis: how to make credible Romeo's wretchedness at hearing from Friar Lawrence of his banishment for killing Tybalt. 3.3 is the heart of Romeo's dramatic arc, the crossroads at which he must chose to journey from boy to manhood, and the root of what theater practitioners blithely call his "character." Self-taught in the ways of Stanislavski, I have done the appropriate work: I've asked the six questions, made my character lists, created a backstory, titled scenes in which I appeared, identified objectives, and (at least attempted) to action, or strategize, my units: I am, in every respect, an actor prepared. Except that I am

lost, flailing, emoting. Incapable of connecting my given circumstances to the character's emotional register, I am reduced to inventing thirteen ways to say "banishèd." I lack the quality given highest accord and unquestioned objectivity among performers: Truth. My problem, I tell the perplexed director, is that my emotional memory banks are ill-equipped to deal with a situation of such complexity and extremity: I've never fallen in love at first sight, never killed, never lost everything; let alone experienced all three states at once. Falling back on adages as old as Harley Granville Barker, the director urges me to "trust" the text. (I was not yet wise enough, thank goodness, to counter, "Which text?") "It's all there in black and white," he urges. "Just energize the words." "Absolutely," I agree. "How?" Eyeing impending theatrical disaster, the director replies: "I don't know. Isn't that *your* job?"

Despite provoking a professional crisis of some magnitude, this memorable and mutually disappointing impasse initiated in me an on-going interest in exploring where and how character might adhere within the formal (rather than solely linguistic) components of Shakespearean dramaturgy: how rhetoric figures the personality and meter maketh the man. That this journey brought me to America via repeated tours with Actors from the London Stage, a company whose productions are premised upon the hegemony of the text, is not surprising. Sir Peter Hall's claim that only fifty actors working in Britain possess the formal training to perform Shakespeare, while hardly verifiable, remains pertinent today (Hall, 13). Despite the work, and writings, of Cicely Berry at the Royal Shakespeare Company, Patsy Rodenberg at the Royal National Theatre, and Giles Block at the Globe, the theatrical (rather than poetic) imperatives and implications of Shakespearean formalism are underserved in drama schools and universities, and institutionally overlooked in the

few subsidized repertory theatres that regularly produce Shakespeare. In America, by contrast, meter (to borrow from the prosodists) is on the rise. Beyond the centers of textual excellence in Washington D.C., Staunton, Virginia, Ashland, Oregon, and San Diego, California, local theater communities, perhaps sensing an opportunity to embrace a playwright whose cultural experiences are so removed from theirs, seem keen to be introduced to Shakespeare on a more formal footing. The professional actors that regularly attended my "Form and Feeling" text and performance classes in Austin, Texas found the rigors of scansion and rhetorical figuring suitably weird and surprisingly liberating: for many American actors, it appears that meter has become the cool way to master speaking Shakespeare without sounding like a Brit.

I want to suggest, however, that the emergence of formal training practices in the States has created something of a conundrum among practitioners imbued in a style of acting founded on psychological realism. "99% of American actors are trained in the tradition of Stanislavsky," writes Scott Kaiser, Head of Voice and Text at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, employing another dubious statistic to good effect. "It is the universal language spoken in all American drama classes, from junior high school to master's programs. It is the *modus operandi* used in rehearsal rooms from Bellingham to Broadway" (Kaiser, xiv). More than a matter of semantics, this universal language articulates one side of an ontological conflict -- in effect a custody battle -- that fixes character either in the more or less authoritative black print of the text or the contested white space of the subtext that surrounds it. To the fundamentalists, character is "black *or* white," never both.

In the black corner, formalists like Hall and Maynard Mack, drawing on the Elizabethan revivalists William Poel and Tyrone Guthrie, champion the "sanctity" and

stability of their sacred texts. Character resides in the type*face*, its *characters* and *figures*: the embodied rhetoric of black upon white. “Shakespeare’s beginning is the word; and his end is also the word,” writes Hall, assigning meaning, and therefore character, solely to the playwright. “”He tells you what he means, and therefore what he means you to feel” (Hall, 209). In the opposing, and rather more crowded corner, the psychological realists, shuffling at what Stanislavski calls “the threshold of the unconscious,” concoct their systems and methods for building inner life from the subtext, from the blank space around and under the words. “Language itself is no longer the plays’ essential ingredient,” Charles Marowitz declares in *Recycling Shakespeare*. “It is their metaphysic, their subterranean imagery, that means most to us today” (Marowitz, 58-59). Released from the text, no longer a “prisoner of words as the only mode of expression, the actor,” write Moscow Arts Theater veterans Irina and Igor Levin, “probes deep into what is hidden behind the characters’ words, into what they have in mind when they speak those words, and their true issues in their confrontations” (Levins, 28). Character is audible in the silence between words, amid the white noise of the actors’ imaginations.

Pragmatic by instinct and necessity, classically trained actors, at least in my experience, tend to avoid these polemical extremes, preferring instead to adopt a mash-up of approaches. As a consequence, a number of theorist-practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic have sought, with more or less conviction, to construct hybrid systems that apply a Stanislavski-based approach to playing Shakespeare. In the opening chapter of his seminal *Playing Shakespeare*, John Barton, R.S.C. associate director and long-time Hall collaborator, acknowledges that the post-Freudian actor seeking psychological truth inevitably, and quite appropriately, adopts terms and practices -- intention, motivation, characterization,

naturalism -- that would be alien to the early modern dramatist. Yet, portraying Shakespeare as "the unconscious inventor both of characterization in depth and of naturalistic speech," Barton claims 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" (Barton, 13-14). The psychology, such as it is, of the Shakespearean character is lexical.

Where Barton creates a kind of *détente* between the two traditions, Kaiser goes even further in reconciling Shakespeare and Stanislavsky. In *Mastering Shakespeare*, he blames the emergence in the 1940s of the kind of interiorized approach to acting that has since kept "the American theater on a short leash and a choker collar" on the thirteen-year hiatus between the publications of Stanislavsky's *An Actor Prepares* and its companion piece, *Building a Character*. In this second volume, which cites Shakespeare liberally, students are taught how to articulate and embody character through mastering the technical aspects of performance: movement, voice, phrasing, and, Kaiser claims, the key formal components of "verse, scansion, and rhetoric." Taken together, Stanislavski's praxis offers a ''way of rehearsing the classics, especially Shakespeare, that is completely compatible with what the [American actor] already knows and does well" (Kaiser xv). Despite the shocking age gap, these marriage partners, both text coaches assert, are well matched.

While Barton and Kaiser's ubiquity in classrooms and on actors' bookshelves speaks to the fulfillment of a need among practitioners for such methodological cross-pollination, in practice their fusions are rather less harmonious. To Barton, character, which he concedes gets little mention beyond the introduction, is constructed through intellectual and inductive reasoning rather than emotional and personal involvement, and its dramatic arc is generically encoded rather than subject to Stanislavski's self-determining, somewhat

Darwinian, forces of conflict and super-objective. Conversely, Kaiser's Art of Orchestration, which he defines as the "process of selecting, arranging, and heightening each moment of a role" (Kaiser 2), deconstructs Shakespeare so completely as to render the formal components unrecognizable, and his assertion that all the actor needs to do to "put his speech back together again […] is practice, practice, practice" (Kaiser, 253), sounds a defensive and disingenuous concluding note. In reality, Kaiser attends to "verse, scansion, and rhetoric" no more than does Stanislavsky's fictional Tortsov, whose *tempo rhythm* equivalence, which in its logical utterances and psychological silences creates a "complete union of the text and the subtext" (Stanislavski, *Character*, 241), is hardly synonymous. In both these marriages, in effect, one partner thoroughly dominates the other.

However valid the process of cherry-picking one system to support the other -- and most (though by no means all) actors prefer a well-stocked tool kit to a well-thumbed manifesto -- the fact is that the two traditions are not entirely compatible, as a disappointed Stanislavsky conceded in later life. "Why couldn't we find the golden mean [between psychological realism and the heroic drama]?" he asks in *My Life in Art*. "Why can I express my perceptions of Chekhov but not of Shakespeare?" (Stanislavski, *Life*, 358). The truth, as he reveals in *Building a Character*, is that for him character resides as much in the subtext as in the text, if not more so: "It is the manifest, the inwardly felt expression of a human being in a part, which flows uninterruptedly beneath the words of the text, giving them life and a basis for existing. […] It is the subtext that makes us say the words we do in a play" (Stanislavski, *Character*, 113). Attempts to blend the two traditions, while admirably inclusive, risk stranding the notion of character in a kind of no-man's land, blurring the black and the white to create something of a grey area for actors.

Over the past year, both as a teacher and a director in Mary Baldwin's Shakespeare and Performance MLitt/MFA program, I have begun to explore an alternative approach that, rather than communicating with actors through a kind of pigeon dialect, encourages a bilingual rehearsal in which the two traditions are taught in parallel rather than in conjunction, and variously accessed when appropriate. Although such a small sample of work hardly justifies a concrete thesis, the experiment has thus far generated some intriguing responses to character development, which I shall précis in the brief space I have here. For last year's Performance of the Language course, in which first-year graduates stage a play under the direction of MFA Director of Training Doreen Bechtol and myself, actors were tasked with building their characters amid the peripatetic world of *Pericles* -- a play of mixed parentage, multiple sources, and fluctuating themes -- through a bifurcated rehearsal process designed to generate dialogue between formal and psycho-physical imaginative exercises in the rehearsal room. Viewpoints[1] of time (kinesthetic, durational, repetitive) were set against considerations of how meter, tempo, and rhythm influence character and narrative; spatial relations were allied to dialogue, and gesture to rhetoric; scripts were deconstructed and action-ed as well as scanned and figured; and so on. In this way, we hoped to encourage actors to develop characters through expressive coherence supported by interior association and a pronounced degree of physical awareness of the world of the play.

What we did not do was instruct actors how to sequence their personal character studies. My subsequent conversations with Scott Campbell and Amy Grubbs, who played

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[1] While Stanislavski's teaching in physical plasticity and expression is most commonly associated with the movement theories of his contemporary Rudolf von Laban, Bechtol's training in Viewpoints, a school of movement improvisation developed by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau in the 1970s, served as our corollary.

Pericles and Marina, revealed, however, a notable tactic: each actor initiated character development through the approach that peculiarly suited the role, and then deployed the alternate method to corroborate, complicate, and sometimes to police their choices. So Campbell, playing the epic Pericles as a lost soul who flies rather than fights and rages at the gods rather than face his own demons, built a macro notion of the character conflicted by socially-mediated notions of duty and responsibility from formal motifs and speech patterns. His subsequent exploration of objectives and tactics, while enriching his emotional life with self-doubt and reactive anxiety, was always subject to alteration or revision, what he calls "a rotating system of checks and balances," when they conflicted with his original, rhetorically defined, and thoroughly Renaissance character sketch.

Grubbs' performance of the more introspective Marina, conversely, was motivated by the super-objective that she cultivated through character lists, and for which her character fought and strategized from first scene to last: "I want (my childhood idea of) my father." Only under the "umbrella of the super-objective," as Grubbs phrases it, could she drill deep into the text and subtext, scanning the lines, looking for more rhetorical devices, and determining goals and tactics for each unit. While her performance was not ostensibly more "modern" than Campbell's, Grubbs' Marina, driven by deep-seated Freudian desires, gave depth and validity to the potentially lurid incest trope initiated by Antiochus' love for his daughter at the play's opening, and her dramatic journey made psychological sense of the sexually ambivalent meeting between father and daughter at its conclusion. As he gropes, verbally, and quite possibly literally, towards the vision of his wife-daughter, Pericles' "Hum, ha" seems to capture the inarticulate stirring of the subconscious, the convergence of text and subtext, and the meeting of classical and modern performance.

Judging by favorable student responses, the *Pericles* experiment deserves a deeper analysis than I can give it here. But what seems evident from the rehearsal process is that actors trained in the two traditions, whether, and however, they choose to privilege one system -- due to playhouse, production, genre, part, or prior training -- are reluctant, incapable even, of divorcing the one from the other: the form from the feeling; the text from the subtext. It is, surely, no more possible for the modern actor to take the psychology out of character than for the classically trained actor to be articulate without *characters*. Text without intention becomes mere "words, words, words," while action unsupported by text results in unplayable subtext. The most colorful Shakespeare characters, I am inclined to assert and encouraged to explore further in my work, are always drawn in interplaying yet distinct tones of black *and* white.

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