

Performing Shakespeare Process Workbook

My personal Shakespeare history

In starting this module, we discussed as a group what we thought of William Shakespeare and his plays and I said that I have a very limited understanding of Shakespeare's works; I find his texts challenging to understand, to memorise and, ultimately, to perform. Despite this, I believe there is a lot of potential for the stories that he tells. My biggest challenges when tackling Shakespeare's work are simply a lack of being able to understand the older language used and how to perform it faithfully. By the end of this module I hope to feel more comfortable reading and performing Shakespeare and to be able to characterise Shakespearean characters more faithfully.

Analysing Shakespeare

The first step to overcoming my issues with performing Shakespeare was to break down his writing into more simple parts. Something I have always known but never properly understood was Shakespeare's use of iambic pentameter; the way he uses syllables and their effect on the text. I discovered that Shakespeare was fond of using iambic pentameter because "it sounds very close to natural, heart-felt speech", as well as having, "the sound of someone saying something important" (Shakespeare's Globe 2025). This was helpful for me to understand because it meant I was able to consider this emphasized sense of importance in what was being said wherever I would recognise a character's words were written in iambic pentameter. If it's in iambic pentameter, it's important. But it is also helpful because an aspect of iambic pentameter is how it is supposed to make the words sound more honest and natural, which would be very helpful in performing.

Our lecturer actually showed us a very helpful video that helped me to better identify iambic pentameter, and that was a clip from TEDx Talks called "Hip-Hop and Shakespeare?", presented by the UK Hip-Hop artist 'Akala'. Initially, I wasn't even confident in giving a definition of iambic pentameter, but Akala helped me to better understand it with a rhythmic 'Dee-Dum, Dee-Dum, Dee-Dum, Dee-Dum, Dee-Dum' representation of ten syllables. Albeit simple, this phrasing has helped me to recognise where in Shakespeare's writing he is using iambic pentameter. This would be helpful going forward as it meant I could more easily identify iambic pentameter when analysing Shakespeare's works and therefore apply the aforementioned emphasized sense of importance in what is being said.

When analysing the opening of *Henry V*, something we found was a use of something called 'elision'. Elision is the shortening or fusing of two different words, this can be done simply to abbreviate a sentence to make it easier to say but it can also be done "to capture the colloquial character of conversational speech or identifies a character's idiosyncratic way of talking." (Shakespeare's Words, 2025) This means that elision can be used to portray a character's background, status, general personality or state of mind etc. For example, a character who abbreviates more can be under pressure or rushed, or perhaps they're not very well spoken, or it could even be that they just have a particular accent that emphasises certain sounds over others. This is all incredibly important information to have when portraying a character and so was very helpful for me to know because I can now consider each of these variables and how they may change my portrayal of a character.

Performing Shakespeare

For my first scene, from *Twelfth Night*, my partner and I looked for context and found that the play is a comedy and that in our scene, Viola is actually disguised as a man and is trying to hide their romantic feelings from Duke Orsino. This was very important to know ahead of time because it clearly has an effect on our characters' dynamic, as well as giving us an idea of the intended atmosphere of the scene. We had many ideas: Viola could be trying to get closer to me and perhaps Orsino would be confused or offended that one of his 'male' servants would show him such affection, or perhaps I could play up Orsino's disapproval or obliviousness for comedic purposes. My partner and I also discussed using Brechtian influences in our costume. Brecht would use costumes "dependent upon how the audience was to view those characters" (The Crescent Theatre, 2025). Meaning, perhaps we could play up the comedic element of Viola's disguise to a point of absurdity, upping the comedic presentation of the scene as well as highlighting Orsino's obliviousness. In summary, It was certainly helpful having this context because it helped us to understand the scene, what it intends to accomplish and come up with ideas to achieve that.

While reading my lines from Orsino, I also realised that he regularly speaks using iambic pentameter, to emphasise his love for a woman named Olivia. This has been a challenge for me to not lean too far into this and speak the lines too much like verse or song. I have even been told that I tend to deliver lines 'melodically', which I intend to overcome through finding a balance between understanding why the lines are written in verse yet not letting the significance of the words get in the way of natural delivery. After trying a few methods to improve my characterisation, the technique I used the most was Stanislavski's 7 steps. Asking myself these questions has made me consider areas of my performance that I never would have otherwise, despite their potential for

effect on my delivery. My main example being for my second scene and my characterisation of Macbeth; I had never considered 'What time is it?', specifically down to the "year, season, month, day and time of the day." (New York film academy, 2015) Time of day being what intrigued me the most. I inferred from the text that it is late evening during our scene and how that may affect Macbeth's mindset: he may be overtired and so may be more volatile or short tempered or impulsive etc. The question of 'What must I overcome to get what I want?' also feels almost tailored to our scene, considering Macbeth is supposed to be trying to overcome the idea of killing an innocent man because of his nerves and morals. This technique has really helped me to ground myself and really understand my characters, therefore making my portrayal feel much more lifelike.

Personal monologue

I had some difficulties trying to find a monologue for this assessment, but I did have a few options. I first considered doing a monologue from Romeo and Juliet, specifically Romeo's monologue when he sees Juliet at her window. I initially chose this monologue because whilst I already had a reasonable knowledge of Romeo's character: a fickle, passionate youth madly in love, I knew Romeo had more depth to his character that I wanted to look into. A helpful source I used was from Sparknotes, which highlights that while Romeo does indeed have a "deep capacity for love", it brought to my attention that his strength of emotion is not limited to love and is in fact "merely a part of his larger capacity for intense feelings of all kinds". This was helpful for me to understand because it enabled me to see Romeo as not just fickle but impulsive in all emotions, perhaps even volatile, with capacity for great strength of emotions positive and negative, giving me much more opportunity for varied performance. I also thought a younger and less experienced character such as Romeo would make for a good contrast in performance to Duke Orsino's more seasoned experiences with love and Macbeth's malicious and selfish desires.

After careful consideration, I instead decided on one of Shylock's monologues from The Merchant of Venice. In this monologue, Shylock talks of revenge against Antonio, who hates Shylock and bullies him for being Jewish. In the play, Shylock has agreed to lend Antonio money but on the condition that if he cannot repay his debt, Shylock would be entitled to one pound of Antonio's flesh. At the beginning of my chosen monologue, Shylock actually briefly references this when he says: "To bait fish withal. If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge." Meaning that, while he says he will use it to bait fish, he won't actually have any real use for Antonio's flesh but rather he sees its value in what it represents: revenge. Shylock is mistreated on account of his religion

throughout the play, a reflection of the state of the world from whence the play was written. BBC Bitesize informs that “Antisemitism, the hatred of Jewish people, was very common in Europe in the 1500s.” All of this is helpful for my characterisation of Shylock. It helps me to see him as a bitter and tired old man, made the villain not out of want but pushed into the role by a society that hates him for what he is. This is also helpful to me because it gives me the idea that Shylock should be angry and vengeful, yet he may even have a hint of sadness or confusion to his delivery. Conveying a sort of self pity that he may as well fit the image the world already has of him, despite him knowing it isn't an accurate representation of him. Almost as if he is playing a character himself. One of the main reasons I chose to do a monologue from Shylock was because I thought it would give me an opportunity to experiment with status, contrasting with the other characters I am performing. I thought Shylock's lower societal status would contrast nicely to the beloved/respected Duke Orsino and Macbeth.

In rehearsing my monologue, an exercise I found helpful was our exploration of Jacques Lecoq's animal studies. The point of using animal studies is to embody what animal you think would well represent your character. Michael Pearce says it “encouraged me to think about their different shapes, sizes, rhythms and functions, and how my human body moved in relation to them.” I relate to this sentiment very much; I love to use this technique to explore my physicality in characterisation. I pictured Shylock as the personification of an owl. Curious, studying eyes, rigid movements, old and wise, but also very much a predator. A character that should not be trifled with. This has been helpful to me because it has helped me to consider more subtle areas of characterisation as well as providing me a framework by having a familiar example, such as an animal, that I can reference when unsure.

Reflection on Performance

Upon completing our practical assessment, I am happy with the final result. I was able to memorise my lines, characterise well and overcome my 'melodic' delivery to give a more naturalistic performance. Some feedback I was given after our dress rehearsal was to 'refine my performance' and use less hand gestures, and I was also able to correct that. However, I realise that I did not maintain energy throughout my lines in the way I wanted to and I did trip over my words during my monologue. If I were to do this assessment again and improve, I would do a more thorough vocal warm up to ensure my delivery was smooth and I would try to be more aware of the energy in my line delivery. Overall, this module has helped me to overcome my struggles with reading, understanding, characterising and performing Shakespeare. And I know that will be useful should I ever revisit Shakespeare in future.

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