

Taking the Ache out of Shakespeare: The Experience of Teaching Shakespeare's Plays Through Performance

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“A Course of Learning and Ingenious Studies”

For almost two decades, I have been teaching an elective course to undergraduate students of English at Lund University, Sweden, based on the simple premise that drama is literature that is not primarily meant to be read, but rather *seen, heard and experienced through performance*. The course (Drama in Practice – Shakespeare on Stage) combines the academic study of one of Shakespeare's plays with a more hands-on approach. I act as director, and the students choose parts, rehearse, and finally perform an abridged version of the play in English, in period costume, with music, before a large and enthusiastic audience of friends, family, fellow students, random and defenceless passers-by, die-hard Shakespeare zealots and complete theatre novices. The first productions were in modern dress and took place in a badly-lit lecture hall. Nowadays, I have gradually built up a wardrobe, usually sewing one or two new costumes for each new production and learning a great deal about historical clothing in the process. We hold our winter performances in the open-plan foyer of one of the two adjoining Centres housing the Humanities at Lund, both of which double bravely as Elizabethan playhouses complete with balconies, apron stages and discovery spaces. During the summer production, we usually opt for a promenade performance at Lund's Open-Air Museum of Cultural History.

This full performance constitutes the “oral exam” for the course. However, the course assessment is based on the students' written work produced in response to a series of lectures I give about the play alongside the rehearsals. The seven papers written by every student (the contents of which will typically be part academic analysis and part diary or work-log) always make fascinating reading and tend to feed into the lectures and rehearsals in an ever-deepening spiralling movement. Just as queries raised in a paper may become next week's lecture subject, epiphanies on the stage may lead to new insights on the page.

At the time this course was launched in 2001, I was already teaching Shakespeare “as literature,” the way I had myself been taught poetry, prose and drama in my years as a student. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my Alma Mater for allowing me to develop a course which departed from this tradition. We as academics, must teach and study the plays as text *as*

well. Studying Shakespeare's plays as literature is infinitely preferable to not studying them at all, yet, as Margaret Jane Kidnie observes, plays exist on a continuum; they "bridge media and can be encountered as either text or performance" (Kidnie 15). Accordingly, it seems to me that treating plays as *text only* is surely as limiting to a full experience of the work as it would be if we were to just read and analyse the score of Mozart's *Requiem*, declaring that there is no need to actually play the music, or even hear it performed. Perhaps one reason why we tend to favour the score over the music is fear of the inherent dichotomy of all theatre: it is immediate and accessible to everyone, yet impossible to pinpoint. No two productions, and no two performances of *the same production*, are ever the same. On the one hand, we lose our critical faculties responding to the ephemeral moment in the wonder of it, and on the other hand, watching a play with our scholarly glasses would make theatre-going a tired, jaded thing. John Russell Brown has put into words the oxymoron that lies at the heart of performance criticism and performance studies:

The best person to describe performances would be someone of strong sensibilities but without conscious predilections or foreknowledge of the play's stage history [...] seeing clearly and responding wholeheartedly and imaginatively. Yet, on the other hand, another person who is experienced [...] might be the more useful [...] critic (Brown 7).

Working with Shakespeare through performance largely eliminates this dichotomy. It both taps into the excitement and immediacy of the stage, and maintains a safe foothold in the text. Teacher and students alike keep bouncing back and forth between the magic and the mechanics of stage and page, and the onstage bolts of lightning no less important than learning the nuts and bolts of text.

For this reason, I am indebted to the students who were brave (or foolish) enough to trust me to carry the first course to its completion in the early 2000s. With them, I first learned that to see a play through the students' fresh young eyes almost invariably becomes a way of discovering brave new worlds within it. I have never taught a course that teaches me so much about Shakespeare. The more I teach it, the more I learn. Like the centipede, blissfully unaware of which leg it *ought* to move first, that first course wobbled along cheerfully and we somehow made it work. Magically, it has worked ever since through more than twenty productions of about a dozen of Shakespeare's comedies, tragedies and romances. Though I have not worked with the chronicles yet, they may be somewhere in the distance (I think I can hear the faint sound of dogs barking at the crooked shadow of Richard III).

Even though the performance counts as their “viva,” students have to complete both the stage part and the study part in order to have their course credits registered. This system of checks and balances gives me leverage for a little benevolent blackmail, should the need arise. I have never needed to use it, so far, because the students on this course have worked harder, and more conscientiously, than any other students I have ever taught. Over the years, I have thought a great deal about why it is that in spite of the long hours, the gruelling work, the blood, sweat and blank verse, do the students choose to go out on a limb and to give it their all? And what are the learning outcomes of Shakespeare in Performance, from the students’ horizon and from mine? In the following, I will endeavour to answer this question in a variety of ways by help of examples from actual plays/courses in the past; a couple of examples are from *Romeo and Juliet* but the bulk are from a number of different productions of *Much Ado About Nothing*. Ever a favourite with the students, this play has been the subject of several “Drama in Practice” courses-cum-performances between 2005 and 2017.

“And Practise Rhetoric in your Common Talk”: Shakespeare the Language Teacher

On the face of it, teaching Shakespeare to non-native speakers, in English, sounds as though it might be more difficult than *just* teaching the language. However, my claim is that in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL), Shakespeare is in fact an asset and not an impediment because the synergy effect is no less than astonishing. At Scandinavian universities, we are very lucky in that, through no merit of our own, we boast a better level of English proficiency than many other countries.¹ In Sweden, English is so common that, although still a foreign language, in some groups it has the virtual function of a slightly pidginized second mother tongue and in the process all but shedding its *foreign* status. However, as is more or less invariably the case when dealing with statistics, this is not the whole truth. Proficiency levels can (and do) in fact vary tremendously among our students, ranging from those who have grown up in an English-speaking home and simply want their university credits as proof of the level of proficiency they already master, to those who want to study English because they actually did poorly in school and now need to improve their language skills. Nearly every time there are also brave students who want to take the Shakespeare in Practice elective because they are afraid of public speaking and want to lay that bugbear to rest in the safe company of the Bard. Yet by the end of the course, *all* these students, different as they are regarding motivation and proficiency, are able to play the plays in the original language rather than in translation. On a similar note, we have plenty of

experience with exchange students who are often brilliant academically but are not as accustomed to hearing and speaking English as our homegrown students. They excel in the written elements of the course, but battle bravely with the spoken word in rehearsals. Yet, in the end they, too, succeed. All this means an added bonus for the intrepid language teacher in that working actively with a play in performance not only gives the students a form of immersion into the world of Shakespeare, but it also improves the students' English proficiency including their fluency, pronunciation, enunciation and vocabulary. It also provides both cultural capital and language training at one fell swoop.

The beneficial effect of using Shakespeare in language learning is not limited to countries teaching English as a foreign language, nor to university-level students. Regardless of mother tongue and educational level, gaining cultural capital and extending one's vocabulary can only be a good thing everywhere and at all grade levels. Jacqui O'Hanlon, Director of Education at the Royal Shakespeare Company, provides a moving example of how, after a school collaboration with the RSC on *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, a child from a socially and economically deprived area of limited reading heritage and vocabulary used Valentine's word "sluggardized" in casual conversation, months after seeing the play and working with the text (O'Hanlon). While there are undoubtedly more common and generally useful words to add to one's vocabulary (the most recent *OED* citation of the word 'sluggardized' in this particular sense is from 1798), one cannot but relish the image of the child's delight in taking this dramatic, colourful and wonderfully onomatopoeic word and running with it by incorporating it into his or her everyday vocabulary.

The undergraduates themselves have also caught on to the correlation between stage practice and vocabulary. One of my students wrote after the course: "Without doubt my oral proficiency has been much improved, and oddly enough it seems as if it has happened without effort." Another student claimed that working on the lines and the play "never seemed an obligation (...) but was more like a 'fun thing,' which left almost the complete script of the play carved into my head, completely without effort. What better way is there to learn?" This accords with what I witness, term after term, with these courses. I have seen the students' English improve, not 'without effort,' as the students above claims, but with an effort that is subsumed in the larger endeavour and excitement of putting on a play.

"O Brave New World!": Exploring Shakespeare's Stage from the Inside

Another advantage brought by the Shakespeare-in-Practice approach is that in the process of staging a play, the students and I end up exploring the pragmatics of stage-acting in

conditions that resemble Shakespeare's own (to the extent that they are known today). We learn, in our bodies and minds, about outdoor acting (projecting, keeping the audience's attention through distracting noises and sights in shared daylight), about costumes and their effect on body language, about cross-gender casting and the challenges of doubling, and the importance of incidental music and related stage business such as dancing, fencing, falconry and Commedia dell'Arte. Our work is rife with snags and impromptu problem-solving. Surprisingly often, we find that when we find ourselves in need, we improvise solutions and incorporate them in our work. These are likely very similar to what Shakespeare's and the other theatre companies would have used, no doubt because they needed them. One brief and very concrete example happened in the first term of the Drama in Practice course. For the performance, I would be out front with the prompt-book and the students would be taking turns at being stage-hands, dressers and prop-masters, so we would need a master document off-stage: a stationary, easy-to-find and easy-to-read outline, or flow chart, of the play listing props, detailing exits and entrances, bringing together changes, music, cues and other vital information. Accordingly, I put together such a document and secured it to the backstage wall with gaffer tape only later realising that my backstage document had a pedigree going back all the way to the Renaissance-theatre *plat* or *plot* posted backstage in the tiring house. Tiffany Stern claims that such surviving plots with annotations for props and music would almost certainly be of use to several categories of backstage employee. She tentatively describes how '[a]ctors could look at plots (...) using them as "safety nets" capable of giving (...) a 'guide to memory' for a nervous player should he wish to take it" (Stern 226-7). Thus, we keep reinventing the wheel, and it is not in the least frustrating. Rather, it is exciting, even exhilarating. For one magical moment we get to sense the presence and see the footprints in the sand of someone who has walked this way before us.

Another example of what happens when you explore Shakespeare's plays from the inside is with *Much Ado About Nothing*, Act 2 Scene 3 with the gulling of Benedick in Leonato's orchard, which begins like this:

Enter BENEDICK

BENEDICK: Boy!

Enter Boy

Boy: Signior?

BENEDICK: In my chamber-window lies a book: bring it hither to me in the orchard.

Boy: I am here already, sir.

BENEDICK: I know that; but I would have thee hence, and here again.

The Boy exits, never to re-surface again in the script. Shakespeare seems to be starting a hare, then abandoning it or even forgetting all about it, mid-jump as it were. It is presumably in order to keep the poor creature from dangling that these lines are often omitted on stage. Some cutting of lines and characters is necessary in most productions, and cutting what does not immediately make any sense seems the obvious choice. Similarly, anyone who reads the play looking for clues to this brief exchange is likely to be nonplussed by the comments and glosses provided. Scholars' and critics' attempt to explain the presence of the Boy in the play range from (in study guides and handbooks) the pragmatic or pedestrian to (in scholarly works) the esoteric:

The new character, the boy, perhaps serves as an image of innocence, or possibly the line was written for the child of one of the company members to play (Irvine 41).

[Benedick's] soliloquy is prefaced, in a way that editions don't explain, by his sending of his boy to fetch the book 'in my chamber window' for him to read 'in the orchard'. The vividness of this (...) throws up a sudden image of the solitude of the real Benedick, whom we see when no one else is there. The book in the hand is for Elizabethans a symbol of the solitary (Everett 82).

We started exploring the scene, working from the simple premise that Shakespeare knew exactly what he was doing and that the scene is there for a reason. "Let's find that reason, or a reason," I told the students. We began experimenting, and almost immediately found out that Benedick asking somebody to fetch something for him just *before* the gulling scene is in fact the perfect set-up for a running gag with the book being delivered to Benedick at some awkward moment when he is unable to receive it without being rumbled by the people he is now eavesdropping on.² Don Pedro and the others go to great lengths to *not* rumble him, conscientiously and studiously noticing absolutely nothing whatsoever as they loudly discuss Beatrice's supposed infatuation with Benedick. The poor Boy may be either in on the joke or

blissfully ignorant of what is going on, ending up totally flummoxed when instead of receiving thanks he is impatiently, and repeatedly, shooed off the stage by Benedick. Incidentally, this reading also accounts for the Boy's disappearance from the script at this point. It would be the natural effect of him having no more lines to speak. Finding the right moment for his subsequent entrance(s) and exit(s) would be a matter for the actors rather than the writer.

In our production, we in fact chose to give the gag another turn of the screw by giving the Boy's lines, and a few others of a similar nature, to Margaret. We found this even funnier since Margaret is in on the gulling plot and gleefully sets about making things as awkward as possible for poor Benedick. Margaret knows full well that Don Pedro *et consortes* will not "see" her or Benedick whatever they do, so she cannot resist rattling his cage. As might be expected, the result is instant karma. Through the rest of our production, Margaret had to lug the (*very* big and heavy) book around with her (her own personal albatross, as it were), and at odd moments trying to hand it over to Benedick to increasing audience laughter. In 5.2, she finally, triumphantly, succeeded in pressing it into his hands only to have it given back to her by Benedick as he sent her to bid Beatrice come to him.

An accidental benefit of this running gag was that our Margaret, who thus ended up as the runner of errands all through the play (fetching Benedick's book in 2.3, bringing Beatrice to the garden to be gulled in 3.1, waking and bringing Beatrice to Hero's chamber in 3.4, and fetching Beatrice at Benedick's request in 5.2) became a more relatable character. This dogsbody Margaret did have good reason to be disgruntled ("why, shall I always keep below stairs?") as an upwardly mobile, Becky Sharp-ish girl, with a keen eye for fashion and finery and bridal gowns, she was someone who could easily be tempted into trying on Hero's garments and pretending to be her for a moment. She is someone who would very much like to captivate and capture Benedick, but finds she has to make do with Borachio.

Exploring Shakespeare's stage from the inside is about much more besides finding practical solutions and creating slapstick. One hugely important way into the play is achieved through unlocking the language in different ways. We must study, research and teach Shakespeare's works as literature, and the playfulness inherent in performance may assist the students' understanding of the plays as text as well. Once having been taught to think of Shakespeare's language as "difficult," the concepts of imagery, rhetoric, rhyme and metre as "complicated," and all of the above as sacrosanct things that must be approached with reverence before "getting" the plays, most students—even those who already love Shakespeare—tend to be too much in awe of the texts to feel free to play with them and truly

make them their own. Hence a great deal of the early work in the course is given to demystifying Shakespeare in different ways. The students quickly adjust to a far less reverent stance and happily play along once they grasp that the groundlings could enjoy the plays knowing not a whit of syllables or syllogisms. They also realise that the present-day image of Shakespeare is nothing like the shrewd pragmatic script-writer with a finger on the pulse of popular taste that his contemporaries would know.

A powerful dose of silliness can help in this as well—such as showing Shakespeare having fun with *deliberately bad* poetry in, for instance, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ('Pyramus and Thisbe') and *As You Like It*. Having explained the nitty-gritty of blank verse and sonnetting, I often ask the students to produce some themselves as part of their next submission with questions like "If your character had a soliloquy, what would it be about?" and "Can you imagine and write Benedick's poem to Beatrice, or hers to him?". By this stage of the course, students throw themselves into this task with gusto, exploring the tools of Shakespeare's trade like a wilderness of curious monkeys writing bad verses from Benedick to Beatrice, or a good soliloquy for Hero, or even (on one memorable occasion) a hilarious Procrastination Sonnet, explaining the mechanics of handing papers in at the eleventh hour.

Similarly, the concept of *speaking* blank verse took some getting used to. Initially, it was met with blank terror, even to the point where some students requested any part just so long as it is *not* a verse-speaking one. However, the moment they discover that blank verse, far from being an extra burden on top of memorizing lines is a helpful mnemonic device providing a stable scaffold on which to hang the text, it ceases to be an impediment and instead becomes a support to prop them up. One student wrote about the magic moment when he realised that blank verse is "not just an artistic choice but a great tool for me as an actor to remember my lines." I was happy to tell him that that is exactly what the actor Ian McKellen says too. He claims that "of course you can sit through a whole Shakespeare play without being aware of it being written in verse at all. (...) the verse is there to *help* the actors, and not for the audience to wallow in something vaguely poetic" (Barton 45).

Nevertheless, forgotten lines can provide teachable moments too, as is shown by this example from a production of *Romeo and Juliet* a few years ago. During rehearsals, our Juliet momentarily lost her temper with herself for repeatedly fluffing the beautiful lines about the nightingale and the lark, and said, in accents between rage and a giggle, "It was the *f***ing* lark that sings so out of tune." She immediately apologised for using bad language, but this was too good a gambit to ignore. Suspending the rehearsal for a little while, I took her and the others through how adding the f-word actually made perfect hexameter of Juliet's pentameter

line. For a short while, there was total stage mayhem as we tried adding two-syllable adverbs to verbs (“One Hero died defiled / but I do *loudly* live”), two-syllable adjectives to nouns (“And surely as I live / I am a *mindless* maid”), building alexandrines from blank verse lines like we were playing with Lego, and laughing at every new effort.

Virtually every single group goes through a similar silly season of (mis)quotation mania, making the play truly their own by playing with it. In this group there was a particularly vicious outbreak. Most of the students had just been reading *Macbeth* with me as part of a course in British Literary History, misapplying lines from the Scottish play to *Romeo and Juliet* became something of a sport. Tybalt suddenly called Romeo “thou shag-ear’d villain”, while the Apothecary stuck his hoary head out the door and exchanged his “Who calls so loud?” for “Here’s a knocking indeed!” from the Porter’s speech. And Juliet, in the death scene, dagger in hand, naturally could not resist saying “Is this a dagger which I see before me?”

“This is the Strangers’ Case”: Making the Play Their Own

One of the main advantages of teaching Shakespeare through performance is that having to *be* these characters on stage—say their words and perform their actions—gives the students an overwhelming need to understand in a way I could only dream of in other courses. Miriam Gilbert wisely says that “[p]erformance makes students close readers and exact speakers” (Gilbert 603). I like to use the analogy of *flying* and *walking*. For students reading a Shakespeare play for the first time (silently, to themselves) it is beguilingly easy to ignore a difficult word by flying over it or just skimming the surface. However, when you act (and speak your part) in a play, you have to walk, wade or hobble through it, difficult though it may be. There is no other way but *through* the bumps and the brambles, because there is simply no birds-eye perspective available. You *are* your part and are responsible for the words spoken and the deeds done, as well as understanding why they are said. In this strange Stockholm-syndrome situation, the fierce loyalty that the students develop towards their characters never ceases to amaze me. True, Shakespeare is “a bad hater at all times” (Mahood 31) never ever allowing any of us to get away with seeing our fellow human beings in only black-and-white, but at no time is this so obvious as when we are made to play a character by speaking his or her words, finding the motivation behind them, and making them our own.

An example from the most recent *Much Ado*-based course (Spring 2017) demonstrates finding motivation. In this group, the female students were in majority, and as a result, there had to be some cross-gender casting. In order to allow those students who were cross-cast as

male characters a “gown role” as well if they so desired. I took time during the abridgment process to re-gender two characters, Conrade and Antonio, and to resuscitate the “ghost-character” Innogen, the wife of Leonato, giving her a handful of lines taken from Leonato and Antonio. The creation of two new women, and the reinstating of a third, was thus a pragmatic choice on my part to facilitate the casting. But the problem with re-gendering is that it tends to leave inconsistencies in the plot. For instance, in 5.1, Antonio threatens physical violence (“Sir boy, I’ll whip you from your foining fence”) and already in 1.3 it is clear that Conrade is a comrade and follower of Don John—neither of these are particularly ladylike activities. How could the reinstated Innogen be in the scene where Hero is denounced by her fiancé, and yet say nothing?

In Joss Whedon’s modern-dress film adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing* from 2012, Conrade is also female. Like the male Conrade of the original, she is brought to Leonato’s house by Don John (whose mistress she clearly is). This works well in an updated framework, but not, I felt, in a Renaissance context. Don Pedro could possibly get away with bringing a high-caste mistress to Leonato’s house, but Don John, so recently taken back into his brother’s favour, most certainly cannot. Our female Conrade would therefore have to belong to Leonato’s household, yet *somehow* be an ally to Don John. *Ergo*, we had to find a different but sustainable position/motivation/back-story for our Lady Conrade. In the course of the rehearsals, we ended up making her a poor relation dependant on Leonato’s household. She was a malcontent Margaret minus the below-stairs duties, a Lady Beatrice minus the charm, warmth and openness that makes Beatrice beloved by all. It takes a generous nature to be grateful with grace, and Lady Conrade does not (as we imagined her) possess such a nature. Like Don John, she has decreed not to sing in her cage. If she had her mouth, she would bite. She is attracted to the bad-boy Don John, perhaps recognising something of her own rebellious spirit in his sullen taciturnity. Probably on the same occasion when Claudio first looked upon Hero “with a soldier’s eye” while Beatrice and Benedick went their first round in which Benedick ended with “a jade’s trick.”

Antonia, reimagined as a strong, kind, outspoken older sister who has no qualms about stepping in and taking over her brother’s quarrel with Don Pedro and Claudio in 5.1, is possibly the reason why Leonato allows and accepts Beatrice’s waywardness. Her authority and competence ends up somewhat dwarfing the household latecomer Leonato’s wife, who, although now the nominal mistress of the house for a couple of decades at least, has never been decisive enough to take over the reins of the household from Leonato’s capable and efficient sister. This scenario in turn lends credibility to Innogen, the weak wife, loving

mother, and ghost character. Much has been said, by representatives of diametrically opposite camps, about the origin and to-be-or-not-to-be of Innogen (Dobson, Watts), but neither side has described on the page what we discovered by actually placing her on the stage with the poignancy of this silenced mother.

In particular, the fact that Innogen was present in the “rotten orange” scene (4.1) was an epiphany when we first rehearsed the scene. Hero, pleading her innocence to her *father* (rather than to her *parents*), did so, not because the playwright has forgotten about Innogen, but because she (Hero) knew, *both* that her mother would already believe her and be on her side, *and* that she would be utterly powerless to help her daughter. While Beatrice spoke up for Hero against Leonato, all Innogen could do was quietly comfort her daughter trying to shield her from what could at any moment turn into physical violence. In the process, she comes in for some flak since we let Leonato turn some of his rage towards Innogen, blaming her for the (presumably bad) genes passed on to her daughter (“Grieved I, I had but one? ‘O, one too much – *by thee!*”). Leonato’s entire household, with the exception of Friar Francis and Beatrice, maintained a stunned silence. Suddenly, they saw their good master and friend in an entirely different light. It was shocking when suddenly we could all see how “real” the situation was, and how this could happen. When, later, the students playing Leonato and Innogen came to me and said that they wanted a kind of off-stage reconciliation somewhere between 4.1 and the final scene, I was not the only one who was surreptitiously relieved. This was a promenade performance, so in the end we had the audience walking past the two of them working things out in the distance. Leonato, having calmed down, appears suitably chastened and apologetic and Innogen, having taken courage from his obvious contrition, finally has her say. To some extent this was a cop-out, but it was a cathartic cop-out that we all sorely needed. This need in itself was testament to how far the students had come in making the play their own.

If this was an epiphany in the sense that the play came shockingly close to real life for the students, one final example from an earlier *Much Ado* production of the opposite scenario shows that real life somehow informs the play and makes “the ‘strangers’” case come alive before our eyes. I have often found in working with *Much Ado* that while students tend to adore the feisty couple, Beatrice and Benedick,³ they often remain uncomfortable with, or at best indifferent to, Hero, who is something of a Victorian ideal woman. She is Hero by name but “Angel in the House” by nature: docile, pliable, and mostly silent in mixed or male company. When we began analysing and rehearsing Hero’s scenes, these students’ initial reaction was impatient frustration at what they saw as her Barbie-doll passivity and naïveté.

Their reaction may have had something to do with the fact that Hero's ordeal is temporary because she 'dies' to live—and marry—again the very next day. Yet it might be argued that the difference between Hero and those other victims of jealousy—Hermione and Desdemona—is one of *degree* rather than of *essence*. At the moment in 4.1, when Hero sinks down in a swoon, *Much Ado* is only a breath away from tragedy. “Do not live, Hero” says her father, and even that level-headed man of peace, the Friar, pragmatically accepts that it is impossible that Hero should live with this taint to her name. It is a chilling thought that if Hero's sullied reputation had not been cleared in the play, she would, on the Friar's advice—in spite of the fact that he believes her guiltless—have had to remain “dead” and hidden away in a convent. In fact, the good Friar's main concern seems to be to exercise damage control and save the family honour, not to clear Hero of the accusations.

As I delivered lecture after lecture on these and related subjects, the students listened with good-humoured incredulity to me going on about jealousy, female chastity, post-war possessiveness and honour culture in the play. Cultures of honour meant nothing to them. They knew of the concept, but had no tools whereby to recognise it and understand what it actually means in real life. To them, Leonato and the others remained cliché hot-headed Sicilians straight out of some soap-opera, equally close to laughter and anger with a bark that is worse than their bite. And anyway, it was just a play, wasn't it? And plays, like soap-operas, must have their drama queens of both sexes—too much realism makes things tedious, surely?

However, it soon became clear that there was someone in the group who knew exactly what I was talking about. Some little way into the production, I realised that the student who had specifically asked for the part of Hero had a background that resonated with similar issues of honour (“I myself come from a culture where virtue is all a woman has to show for herself so an accusation like this is the worst thing that can happen,” she wrote in a paper). Like Hero, she belonged to a family that was warm, loving and protective—but also to some degree possessive and controlling. At present, she was struggling with this, negotiating for herself a way to reconcile her family's rules with the life she wanted to lead. I had already noticed that in rehearsals she played the abortive wedding scene in 4.1 very poignantly as a matter of life and death, and now I knew why.

Interestingly, it was not easy for her to free herself from the idea of a “taint”. At one point, I asked this group of students to hand in an imagined soliloquy for their character as part of a paper asking where in the play would it be, and what would it be about. “Hero's” imagined soliloquy dealt with her thoughts going into the second wedding ceremony. Her

Hero felt she *had to* marry Claudio now because in spite of being proven innocent, she knew that she was unmarriageable to anyone else. She was a tainted woman, or a “rotten orange.” As our work progressed and the students became a close-knit group, I could see how the penny dropped for the others. Seeing Hero’s plight through this student, who was like them and yet not like them in that her life had been different from theirs, made them understand what all my words and explanations had not. What was it really like to negotiate life in what can loosely be described as an “honour culture.” I am not sure that “Hero” really needed us for working out which way to go, although I am sure that Shakespeare helped. I do know that with that chance to learn from *within* as well as from without, the other students gained something important: a thoughtfulness an insight about identity, invaluable to anyone who is taking his or her first adult steps on a journey towards self-knowledge.

A coda on a more light-hearted note on doubling—of which there was a great deal in this particular production, since the group was comparatively small—is often described in terms of its function, such as “deficiency doubling” (making the company seem more rich in actors by making everyone double in mass scenes and the like) and “virtuoso doubling”—that is, open and ostentatious doubling of widely different parts, so as to show the actor’s versatility (Sprague). To these, I would like to add (and only partly tongue-in-cheek) one more: doubling as catharsis. Hero in this production was, for pragmatic reasons, doubled with Dogberry, a deficiency doubling if ever there was one. After the performance, “Hero” wrote a little contritely—but only a *very* little—about how she had found herself unable to stop yanking Borachio’s chains in the trial scene. It seemed almost as though the miseries of gentle Hero were visited upon Borachio by her avenging other half, Dogberry. Thus empowered, Hero was finally allowed to achieve catharsis, chastising the man who had been instrumental in impugning her chastity.

Epilogue

Although I began this paper with the promise to try to pinpoint some of the facts behind teaching Shakespeare through performance, I realise that, like so many times before, I have failed in that mission. The general intention and those specific facts have once more been subsumed in the particular avalanche of anecdotal material that is, invariably, the outcome when I try to think rationally and methodically about the wondrous, amorphous undertaking, of staging Shakespeare’s plays with university undergraduates.

And yet: though this be madness, there *is* method in’t. There really is. For me at least, it is obvious that turning the seminar room into a rehearsal room (to adapt Jacqui O’Hanlon’s

phrase) has resulted in the students engaging with Shakespeare's plays with astonishing urgency and commitment. I may have failed in pinpointing exactly what it is that Shakespeare can do for the students in terms of language learning, insights and personal growth, but of this I am sure: in their sheer lovability, silliness, breath-taking beauty, high drama, deep tragedy, and intense humanity, these plays call forth the very best in us all—and I am forever in awe of what the students can accomplish, carrying the words forward, and being carried by them.

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Notes

¹ <https://www.ef.se/epi/> Year after year, the EF English Proficiency Index, which ranks 88 countries by average level of English, reads very much like the Eurovision Song Contest scores (at least if we ignore the non-European countries, some of them also high on the list). The latest index (data from 2017, published in 2018) has Sweden on top (with the Netherlands and Singapore as 2 and 3), and Norway and Denmark at 4 and 5, respectively.

² I later discovered that this exact gag also appears in the 2011 *Much Ado*, directed by Josie Rourke and starring Catherine Tate and David Tennant as Beatrice and Benedick.

³ I have a sneaking feeling that in spite of newer film versions such as Joss Whedon’s, this is still due to the Thompson/Branagh effect (Hapgood 153).