Links & Letters 2, 1995 9-17

Possibilities of Performance: New Ways of Teaching Dramatic Literature

David Olive
Department of English and History
Manchester Metropolitan University

Abstract

This essay is aimed at students and teachers of dramatic literature and encourages a teaching method which seeks to elicit responses based on performance. The two teaching activities described are practical drama workshops complemented by the viewing of film and/or television versions of the same play on video. The banquet scene from *Macbeth* (Act 3, Scene 4) is analysed from the point of view of what students can learn from the two complementary methods. There is also a similar, though much briefer, treatment of an extract from Strindberg's *Miss Julie* to indicate how such an approach can be used when teaching any form of dramatic literature. The conclusion drawn is that such teaching methods encourage an active learning experience. A performance demands a close study of the text, while the text in turn should be treated as a blueprint for performance.

Key words: Teaching methods, Practical drama workshops, Film/television versions, *Macbeth*, *Miss Julie*.

Drama —and for the purposes of this article, the abbreviated term will be used to refer to all forms of dramatic literature— presents problems of teaching not encountered in other genres. In particular, we are aware that novels and poetry are primarily written to be read, whereas drama is written to be performed. Having said that, all of us who have taught drama may well have found ourselves stating that: «Of course we should not be treating a play as a dramatic poem», and then find ourselves going on to give an account of the poetic motifs running through the same play. But teaching drama as a performance activity does raise fundamental questions. Are we teaching literature? Or are we teaching theatre studies? The demarcation lines are finely drawn, as they are when teaching cultural studies. But I would maintain that we have to do more than make a passing reference to the performance element of drama. Students can gain so much if they are encouraged to regard a play as a script, a blue- print for a performance, as well as a text. Having said that, I am not proposing that the teaching of drama should exclude the more conventional approaches. A lecture on Shakespearean imagery followed by a detailed discussion can be of

enormous benefit to students. But there should also be a place for the teaching of drama as performance.

If this is accepted, the next question is —how do we actually teach performance studies? Moreover, are we referring here to the original performance, stage history or more recent productions? In fact, I would argue that all these aspects of performance are relevant and can be of interest. Yet there are obvious problems of source material when we come to study the original productions and stage history and so such approaches can be limited.

When it comes to recent productions, it is always advantageous to teach in a university town or city which has a thriving theatrical centre[1]. As a result, students are occasionally able to see plays currently being studied performed by professionals. Whenever possible, it is arranged for the directors to talk to students about the approach they have adopted to the play. But perhaps one of the most rewarding experiences the author has had is being invited to take a group of students to a performance of Pinter's *The Homecoming* in its final stages of rehearsal. The director concerned had reached a point in the rehearsal process where he welcomed an audience response so that his actors could give more thought to the timing of their lines after laughter. Here was a director who was fully aware that a Pinter play can produce laughter from an audience at the most unexpected moments and was hoping to prepare his cast for this experience. From our point of view, we were able to observe actors still discussing different ways of delivering lines and positioning themselves on stage. It was therefore quite revealing to observe actors discovering other nuances in their performance even in the final stages of rehearsal and proved to the students, far more effectively than the same point being made in a lecture, that a performance is never fixed but is constantly undergoing changes.

Such experiences are rare for a teacher of drama and clearly cannot be anticipated when working out a teaching programme for a course at the beginning of the academic year. Not all directors work in this way. Some are often reluctant to discuss their work and when they do, it cannot be guaranteed that they will engage students' interest when talking about their approach to a play.

In terms of getting students to observe the performance of professional actors, I have found that film and television versions of plays on video, which have become increasingly available recently, can be of enormous help in teaching drama. There are so many ways in which videos can help students to appreciate aspects of performance. Firstly, they are in a position to view a play about to be studied at one sitting prior to hearing a lecture on it. A teacher can also use an extract from a video to illustrate a point being made in a lecture and so provide variety in its delivery. Better still, having examined a particular scene in some depth, if two versions of the same play are available, it is always of

1. I myself am fortunate enough to teach in Manchester, which has several theatres frequently producing a wide range of plays.

benefit to show them one after each other so that students are made aware that the same scene can be performed in different ways.

Another method the author has found in which students' interest is engaged most actively is when practical drama workshops have been conducted. It should be stressed at the outset that such workshops are not intended to produce a polished performance. Far from it, for one must bear in mind that the students concerned are not training to be actors, but instead are usually majoring in English and have simply elected to take a course in Shakespeare or modern drama. The primary aim behind such sessions is to get students to think about the problems involved in performance. Simply having them walk through a scene can reveal so much. In this process, students are confronted with basic staging problems, such as how to assemble a large crowd onto a stage, thus avoiding any blocking, how to enable the main characters to achieve dominance by their positioning on stage, the different ways in which lines can be delivered to produce different meanings and the importance of stage business and dress. All these aspects come under the general theoretical heading of semiotics. Yet I have found that students, engaged in such practical workshops, learn far more about semiotics in this way. Moreover, as well as understanding how a scene actually works, quite often students can discover other meanings which are not so obvious in a reading of the play.

Perhaps the most beneficial teaching method is to combine a practical workshop with a viewing of a film or television version. It is in this way that students, who have worked on an extract from a play and become familiar with some of the problems involved, are in a better position to view more critically how a group of professional actors perform the same extract. I propose to examine a scene from *Macbeth* to illustrate the point.

When conducting a practical workshop on any Shakespeare play, initial decisions have to be taken on the actual stage to be used. Even when it is decided to present the workshop on an imaginary «Elizabethan» stage, further decisions have to be taken regarding which reconstruction is to be used. This clearly demands some knowledge (which can be supplied in an accompanying lecture) of the various reconstructions that have been attempted during the last 40-50 years. But the added advantage of conducting a practical workshop on such an «Elizabethan» stage is that students appreciate all the more that such reconstructions are not only of interest to the theatre historians, but have a profound effect on any performance.

Turning to *Macbeth*, a play of such complexity and density, it is clear that students do need introductory lectures on such features as the internal and external conflicts pervading the play, its essential ambivalence, the questions raised about the nature of kingship and the network of poetic motifs which serve to highlight these and other aspects of the play. But a student's understanding and knowledge of the play can be enriched even further when such lectures are complemented by a performance-based approach, in which the students first walk through a scene and then view a film version.

A good scene to choose from *Macbeth* is the banquet scene, (Act 3, Scene 4), for here we witness how the initial, outward control and decorum of the main protagonists gradually crumbles. The scene's development can be subdivided into four main sections, namely the opening phase when Macbeth and Lady Macbeth attempt to impose a sense of harmony on the occasion, the arrival of the murderer, the entrance of the ghost and then finally the last section of the scene when Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are left alone together.

In staging the brief, opening phase of the scene, students will need to decide how to suggest to an audience the outward impression of decorum. This will involve an initial exercise in working out the order in which the characters enter the stage, together with where each character sits at the banquet table. Here the text itself gives an indication of the hierarchical nature of the Scottish court, as Macbeth's opening line:

> You know your own degrees, sit down.[2]

suggests to us. At the same time, a careful analysis of the first few lines indicates how Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are playing the role of the host and hostess. Consequently, the actions of the actors must suit the words and so show how they are in full control of the situation at this point.

The first crack revealed in the outward surface comes with the entrance of the murderer. This move presents several staging problems. Firstly, decisions have to be made regarding the location of Macbeth and the murderer on stage. They are presumably some distance from the guests at the banquet table, though their dialogue has to be heard by the audience. Secondly, how does Lady Macbeth react to this unexpected development? Clearly she should attempt to maintain her outward calm, though perhaps inwardly suspecting that the entrance of this stranger has something to do with Macbeth's previous reference to the «deed of dreadful note»[3]. Also, how do the guests conduct themselves during this period? How does Lady Macbeth succeed in distracting them? In the ensuing dialogue, it is worth noting that Macbeth constantly switches between interrogating the murderer and musing to himself. At such moments, does Macbeth move away from the murderer in keeping with his introspective mood? Finally, the student allotted the part of Macbeth will have to decide on the most appropriate actions to suit such lines as:

> But now I am cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in
> To saucy doubts and fears.[4]

After dispatching the murderer, Macbeth rejoins Lady Macbeth and their guests, adopting once more the air of conviviality.

2. W. Shakespeare. *Macbeth*, G.K. Hunter (ed.) (1967). New Penguin, Act 3, Scene 4, l.: 1.
3. Ibid., Act 3, Scene 2, l.: 44.
4. Ibid., Act 3, Scene 4, ll.: 23-24.

It is at this point that the stage directions indicate the first entrance of the ghost of Banquo, which creates some of the main staging problems, which students will have to resolve in a practical workshop session. Firstly, at what point does the ghost enter? If it is at line 38, why does not Macbeth see the ghost immediately? One of the main problems to be resolved is how to suggest to the audience that the ghost is invisible to all but Macbeth. Macbeth later refers to the ghost's «gory locks» and this may well prompt a discussion of the actual appearance of the ghost. Again it is worth discussing Lady Macbeth's role at this point, as she tries to soothe her guests, referring to Macbeth's momentary fit and then contemptuously asking Macbeth —«Are you a man?»[5]. It is also worth discussing the dramatic effects Shakespeare was trying to create, having the ghost exit and then enter again several lines later. Once more, those students playing the non-speaking parts of the guests have to resolve among themselves how they are to react. Finally in this section, the actors' stage movements should reflect the disruption of the hierarchical order. In particular, some consideration should be given to the way in which the guests leave the stage, as Lady Macbeth urges them:

> At once, good night.
> Stand not upon the order of your going;
> But go at once.[6]

It should be clear that all sense of formality and hierarchical order has now been cast aside.

In the last part of the scene, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are left alone together. Now we see Macbeth as the dominant partner in the relationship. The students should be asked to consider how their stage movements might reflect their separation. It is also worth discussing how Macbeth delivers the line —«Come, we'll to sleep»[7]. Does it reflect his sheer fatigue and despair? Moreover, does he show any feelings of tenderness towards Lady Macbeth at this point, as if realising that their relationship has now been completely destroyed? Or does he indicate in this brief line a sense of impatience, a need to move on?

These are only some of the staging problems and questions raised during a practical workshop session. Having alerted students to such problems and questions, it is instructive to turn to different film and television versions of the same scene.

There are several versions of Macbeth now available on video for sale or hire[8]. Polanski made his film in 1971 and in 1983 Jack Gold directed Macbeth

5. Ibid., Act 3, Scene 4, l.: 57.
6. Ibid., Act 3, Scene 4, ll.: 117-118.
7. Ibid., Act 3, Scene 4, l.: 141.
8. C. See Grant (ed.) (1992). *As You Like It.* Audio-Visual Shakespeare, British Universities Film and Video Council.

as part of the BBC Television Shakespeare series. They provide a striking contrast in the way that the same play can be performed in different ways. Before analysing closely such versions, students need to be introduced to some of the basic skills involved in «reading» films, in particular the attempts made to translate Shakespeare's language into the appropriate visual image. Similarly, it is worth touching on the basic differences between a film and a television version, not only in terms of the scope and expense involved, but the limitations of a television, as opposed to a film camera. Recently, there have been several publications in this and other related areas of Shakespearean studies. The bibliography included at the end of this article includes a selection of such publications.

Turning to the two selected examples, students should be quick to appreciate the opportunities afforded by both film and television. At the beginning of the banquet scene, both directors avoid the entrance of Macbeth and his court as the film and television sequences cut to a banquet already in progress. One of the first differences to be noted though is how the two directors deal with the entrance of the murderer. As elsewhere, Gold is more faithful to Shakespeare's text and has Macbeth distract his guests sat at the table by passing round a goblet of wine so that they take it in turns to drink to the new king's health. Macbeth, closely watched by Lady Macbeth, then takes the murderer behind a pillar and questions him about Banquo. It is worth noting from the point of view of performance that Macbeth steps away from the murderer and addresses the camera when describing his present emotional state. In Polanski's film, the dialogue between Macbeth and the murderer is treated somewhat differently. Firstly, it is located before the banquet scene. Moreover, Macbeth's servant, Seyton, is also present and, after a nod from Macbeth, leads the murderer away. But instead of his expected reward, the murderer and his accomplice are thrown into a well. An interesting visual image introduced immediately after this is the shot of the dead body of the bear, previously used for the entertainment of the court in a savage bear-baiting scene, now being dragged away by servants. The parallel with the treatment of the murderers is well observed.

But perhaps the most striking difference between the two versions is the treatment of Banquo's ghost. Polanski uses all the film technology at his disposal and has a superimposed image of the bloodied figure advancing towards Macbeth. Picking up the image of the bear-baiting, Macbeth backs away in horror, stumbles and falls back against the same pillar to which the bear had been tied, thus anticipating his later comment about being:

> tied to a stake; I cannot fly,
> But bear-like I must fight the course.[9]

9. W. Shakespeare. *Macbeth.* G.K. Hunter, (ed.) (1967). New Penguin, Act 5, Scene 6, ll.: 11-12.

Such a highly filmic interpretation of Banquo's ghost and its effect on Macbeth is contrasted with Gold's television version. Here the director does not have a ghost at all, but instead concentrates the camera mainly on Macbeth, who stares in horror at the imagined ghost at the far end of the table. The camera closes in on both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, who is desperately trying to restore the «admired disorder» Macbeth has created. Her words to him —«You look but on a stool»[10]— now make more sense. But what is also relevant here is the contrasting performances of the two Macbeths. In particular, we hear every word Jon Finch says in the Polanski film and may feel that in the television version Nicol Williamson's snarling, rasping delivery is an extreme response. But this is a point worth debating with students and could lead to a discussion not only on the individual performances and interpretation but on the extent of realism in Shakespeare's dialogue and situation. After all, how do you react and speak when you see a ghost?

In the final section of this scene, Williamson's Macbeth is also much more domineering. He brings his fist down on the lighted candles and almost drags a fainting and emotionally exhausted Lady Macbeth off to bed. In contrast, in Polanski's film Macbeth and Lady Macbeth exit up the stairs in a slow walk and the scene is concluded in their bedroom. One must bear in mind here the performance of Lady Macbeth, because we do not see her again until the sleepwalking scene (Act 5, Scene 1). Consequently, the last section of Act. 3, Scene 4 should go some way towards preparing us for this. In the BBC television version, Jane Lapotaire's Lady Macbeth is presented as someone already quite distraught, while in Polanski's film Lady Macbeth, played by Francesca Annis, seems to be relatively unaffected by past events.

I have examined in some detail ways in which a scene from Shakespeare can be analysed as a result of a practical workshop in conjunction with a viewing of a film and/or television version on video. The same approach could be adopted when teaching any form of drama. For example, Strindberg's Miss Julie is often used for a course on modern drama as it does mark an important breakthrough in the development of naturalism in the theatre. Any scene could be taken from the play for purposes of a practical drama workshop. One interesting example, early on in the play, would be when the servant, Christine, is left on her own in the kitchen while her fiancee, Jean, and Miss Julie go off to join the dance in the nearby barn. The scene provides several interesting issues related to Strindberg's attempts to create naturalism in the theatre.

First of all, he was clearly aware that he was flouting nineteenth-century theatrical conventions in such a scene for in the stage directions he advises the actress playing the part of Christine to «turn her back on the audience»[11] whenever it is necessary. In this way Strindberg allows the actress room for improvisation. But one of the main questions to be raised in such a workshop session

10. Ibid., Act. 3, Scene 4, l.: 67.
11. A. Strindberg. *Miss Julie.* M. Meyer (transl.) (1976). Eyre Methuen, p. 111.

is the extent to which Christine can engage the interest of the audience by means of stage business rather than dialogue. Certainly the dramatist gives Christine suggestions on how to busy herself. For example, she is required to clear the table where Jean has been eating a meal she has just cooked for him, wash up and dry the dishes. She also has to remove her apron, sit down at the table and crisp her hair by means of a curling iron. One advantage of conducting a practical workshop on this scene is that it makes students more aware of the time involved in carrying out such stage business. Interestingly enough, Strindberg comments on this scene in the Preface to Miss Julie stating that:

> a talented actor... may be able to improvise better than the author, who cannot calculate in advance... how long the audience will accept the illusion.[12]

At the same time, Strindberg provides specific stage business indicating what Christine may be thinking while she carries out such mundane activities. For example, she stops at the kitchen doorway and listens to the dance music which can be faintly heard in the background. She also discovers Miss Julie's handkerchief which she has left behind. In the process of picking it up and smelling it, the actress playing the part can convey to the audience her silent thoughts. These are only some of the aspects of the scene which can be explored in a practical workshop session.

It may also be rewarding to view the film version of Miss Julie which was made in 1973 by the Royal Shakespeare Company. In the scene just described, Heather Canning playing the part of Christine goes about her kitchen duties in a methodical manner. It is particularly interesting to note that the scene lasts almost four minutes, which is quite long for any film sequence without dialogue. Students can also observe Christine in close-up as she attempts to make herself attractive for Jean. As a result, we are provided with several clues regarding Christine's motivation for behaving in the way she does and also her relationship with both her fiancé, Jean, and her mistress, Miss Julie.

In conclusion, I would suggest that practical workshop sessions and the viewing of film and/or television versions are valid teaching methods in that they both draw the attention of students to the possibilities of performance. They can be carried out as separate activities or they can be used to complement each other. Their purpose is to provide students with the opportunity to engage with the text in a constructive and meaningful way. Conversely, students have to consider ways in which stage business and movements, in fact all other non-verbal expressions of meaning, match what is being said. It is this two-way process which is at the heart of the creative process involved in a performance of a play.

12. Ibid., p. 100.

References

BULMAN, J.C. and COURSEN, H.R. (1988). *Shakespeare on television.* University Press of New England.

COURSEN, H.R. (1992). *Shakespearean performance as interpretation.* Associated University Press.

DAVIES, A. (1988). *Filming Shakespeare's plays.* Cambridge University Press.

GRANT, C. (ed.) (1992). *As you like it: Audio-Visual Shakespeare.* British Universities Film and Video Council.

JORGENS, J. (1977). *Shakespeare on film.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

SHAKESPEARE, W. (1967). *Macbeth.* Hunter, G.K. (ed.) London: New Penguin.

STRINDBERG, A. (1976). *Miss Julie.* Translated by Meyer, M. Eyre.

WILLEMS, M. (ed.) (1987). *Shakespeare à la television.* Rouen: University of Rouen.