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A “TRESPASS SWEETLY URGED”
(1.5.108) IN MEISNER

Shakespeare’s iambic verse is clearly not seeking to reproduce colloquial speech since it is built on a regular verse form. What can be said is that the underlying rhythm of the iambics alternate short and long stresses is like a heartbeat, and thus naturally evokes emotion. Shakespeare’s language shapes and directs the quality not just of what is expressed, but what is felt and experienced by the actor who speaks the words. The beauty of the iambic form is that once you have set it up as the basic, underlying rhythm or “heartbeat” of the text, the state of mind of each character can then be revealed by the nature and extent of their divergence from the regularity of that form. The language guides or instructs the actor when to adhere to the regular beat and when to disrupt or reverse it; when to speed up or slow down; when to speak loudly and when softly; when to sound staccato and when legato; when to pitch high and when low; and when to breathe. In many ways it is like a musical score, and any actor attempting this text needs to understand its notation and instructions.

While contemporary acting techniques such as that of Sanford Meisner stimulate a range of emotional choices for an actor relative to a play text, they offer little to grapple with the technical, or what we might even dub physical requirements demanded by the rhetorical structures in Elizabethan drama. Meisner felt that an actor should find an emotion appropriate to the character’s state of mind and need at the beginning of a scene, and then allow the text to emerge naturally on the “river” of the emotional interaction. Meisner developed a series of exercises aimed at fostering increased powers of observation, spontaneity, responsiveness, and communication with fellow actors, as a result of a series of external impulses. He focused on the need to explore the dynamics of scenic action, the reality of behavior, in the exchange between characters. It is these discoveries of behavior, which happen in the moment in which they are being executed, which ultimately defined the Meisner technique. The presence of technical instructions in Shakespeare’s language may at first seem incompatible with the application of Meisner’s theories. If the text is a canoe floating on the river of the emotion (Meisner and Longwell 115), then arguably you should not study its structure too closely beforehand, but rather allow it to emerge in the context of the scene. As a starting exercise, Meisner often required actors to speak the text without expression or meaning to avoid a fixed interpretation. He famously asserted, “an ounce of behavior is worth a pound of words” (4). However, with Shakespeare’s iambic text it is both possible and necessary to operate a more analytical approach.

Through exercises such as those presented here actors can explore the “instructions” contained in Shakespeare’s language without going against the basic principles of Meisner’s technique. What might appear contradictory—the technical versus the intuitive, the analytic versus the emotional—is not necessarily. In fact, in all aspects of their craft, actors work with a combination of the fixed, such as the text, and the variable, such as the audience. Furthermore, technical features of Shakespeare’s text offer actors a great deal emotionally: the language can help shape the emotion, while the breath required to deliver complex thoughts can help the actor to keep the voice resonant and the body open

and responsive. These benefits cannot be accessed, however, if the body starts from a closed, purely analytic place—if there is no preparation to “particularize” the character within the actor’s emotional imagination and create a living human, who acts and reacts honestly in front of an audience. Likewise, when performing Shakespeare, both thought and word live in the moment of utterance. However closely you have followed the “instructions” in the text and however beautifully you speak the language, there will be no truth, humanity, and clarity in an actor’s performance unless he or she works from truthful emotion, with genuine vulnerability.

At the CDC, I led our actors through my “trespass” in Meisner technique, that aims to facilitate the open, spontaneous emotional communication while accessing the technical benefits of Shakespeare’s languages, both physically and emotionally. While this would naturally influence their choices, the actors were asked to temporally set it aside for the first variation, and play—always reacting to one another, within the confines of the exercise. Simply put, this exercise is designed to get actors “out of their heads” so that they can expand the range of natural behavioral options available, expressed ultimately with the text and its physical structures in the moments of performance.

DYNAMIC INTERCHANGE BETWEEN BEATS

VARIATION 1

1. Actors begin the scene, and are then signaled by the coach to “change” at random moments throughout—to make a shift in action or energy, without thought or self-censoring.
2. Actors stop and take a moment to regroup.
3. Actors attack the text again with a fresh impulse—a new tactic, action, or thought, as above. As a result of the first variation, actors get their muscles used to playing changes and explore shifts in posture, vocal pitch, eye focus, and tempo, etc. Most importantly, by responding to random external suggestions, the actors “get out of their heads” and feel freer to trust impulses.

VARIATION 2

1. Actors begin the scene. Actors are coached to produce and express “changes” on their own accord, throughout the scene. They may rely on instincts and intuitive inspirations, coming from themselves, reacting to each other, and from prior verse analysis.
2. Actors stop and take a moment to regroup.
3. Actors attack the text again with a new impulse—a change in action, tactic, or thought. They are encouraged to play the change fully, exploring the size of the space and how big the character and moment can be. The space between the actors can also be explored to its full extent. Having explored their characters, the space, and relational moment in broad terms, our actors were led through the third exercise.

VARIATION 3

1. Actors begin the scene. Actors are coached to continue to produce the changes on their own accord and to explore broad choices. Additionally, they are encouraged to internalize the changes, to connect them to realistic actions based in verse analysis and in reaction to each other, informed by freedoms gained in the previous two variations.
2. Actors stop and take a moment to regroup.
3. Actors are asked to attack the text again with a new impulse—a change in action, tactic, or

thought. They are prompted to speed up their changes in order to create more nuance and naturalness in their performance. Playing subtly allows the actors to particularize the internalization of changes and more truthful use of space.

As Meisner insisted and the exercises presented at the CDC demonstrated, the text alone will not get the actor to the fullest, most expressive and genuine performance possible. As a result of these exercises, our actors connected with each other, explored the space dynamically, and conveyed the structure of the moment in which Romeo and Juliet first meet to the audience with more physical openness, emotional fullness, and honesty. Inspired by Meisner's emphasis on truth in doing, the exercises provided here help actors get "out of their heads" and expand the range of behavioral options available to their character, as well as the emotions influencing how he/she speaks the text. These techniques help an actor live in the heartbeat of the text by training them to react instinctually and trust impulses while performing as the character Shakespearean or otherwise.