Active Shakespeare

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Delivered by:
Lucy Kerbel
and
Mark Londesborough
Punctuation and thought structure

Aim

These exercises are about using punctuation as a means of accessing the rhythm and thought structure of Shakespeare’s language.

Accurately playing the punctuation helps us understand how a character’s thoughts build and unfold, and can guide us to clarity and specificity in performance.

These exercises are also useful in helping a performer with a fast tempo to slow down and in achieving strong and unified ensemble speaking.

Exercise 1 – Walking and turning

- Read through the text aloud as a group, either in a circle or walking in the space.
- Read it again, everyone at their own pace. This time walk and speak until you come to a full stop, exclamation mark or question mark. When you reach one of these major punctuations stop walking, turn and set off in a new direction.
- Ask participants how these pauses affect their reading and understanding of the text. Major punctuation marks can indicate where thoughts begin and end.
- Repeat the exercise. This time add in a spring in your step for the semi-colons or colons.
- These punctuation marks are used to show when a thought is re-energised or goes in a different direction.

Exercise 2 – Click, slap, stamp

- For a variation on this work, stand as a group in a circle. Go around the circle reading the text aloud, with each person reading up to a punctuation mark. This means that some people will only have perhaps one word, which is fine.
- Repeat this, but this time have the whole group marking in the punctuation with sound and gesture. You might use a click for a comma, a slap of the thigh for a colon or semi-colon and a stamp of the foot for a full stop.
- Once you have established this you can develop the exercise further. As before, each person in the group reads aloud up to a punctuation mark. The rest of the group mark in the punctuation physically, but they do so based on what they hear, rather than what they read.

This means that the only people looking at the text are the person speaking aloud and the person about to read. Everyone else is listening and responding to the energy with which the speaker completes their phrase and/or hands it on.

Exercise 3 – Chair swap

- This is a simple but effective variation on physicalising the punctuation.
o Place two chairs a little apart from each other. In this task, the performer has to be sitting on a chair in order to speak, but must change chairs on every punctuation.

o The temptation is to ‘cheat’ by speaking during transit from one chair to another. Encourage the performer to fully observe the rules of the exercise and to allow themselves the time they need to move without speaking from one chair to another.

**Jostling and obstacles**

**Aim**

These exercises explore how working against a physical obstacle can energise and free the performer and their voice.

**Exercise 1 – Police lines**

This exercise can be very fruitful when working on a scene between two characters who are sparring or engaged in a battle of some sort, for example, Oberon and Titania or Beatrice and Benedick.

o Set your two characters at opposite ends of the room. Divide the rest of the company into two halves and ask them to form two police lines with arms linked, one in front of each of the characters.

o The two speaking actors then play the scene but their task is to try to get to their opponent: leaning over, crawling under and pushing through the line up.

**Variation**

o You can vary the degree of physical obstacle/challenge depending on the context of the scene or the company you are working with. For example, you could set the speaking characters the same challenge of getting to each other, but no physical contact is allowed: the ensemble walk around and in between them like a fluid barrier.

**Exercise 2 – The Posse**

Again, this is a useful exercise with a confrontational scene, – whether playful or more serious.

o Set your two speaking characters facing each other, some distance apart. Divide the rest of the group into two. Each half will be the posse or crew of one of the characters and will use voice and gesture to intimidate and belittle their opponent while supporting their leader.

o The characters speaking the text will have to compete with all the noise and kerfuffle. This can be very freeing for actors since not only do they have to work at a more energised physical and vocal level, but they are not being listened to critically or judged as much as they might be in a quiet room.

➢ As well as being good exploratory tasks Exercises 2 and 3 are potentially useful ways into staging a scene. Obviously you might not want to work at the same level when in performance as in these exercises, but the tasks can provide a starting point for blocking and can help give the ensemble very clear roles and stakes to play in the action.
Exercise 3 - Barriers to being heard

**AIM**

These exercises demonstrate how energising speech can aid actors (and audiences) in understanding the text. This can be a useful introduction to the idea of character objectives in a scene.

**INSTRUCTIONS**

- In pairs, walk in the space with one person speaking and one listening.
- The listener pretends to be uninterested, with the speaker trying to get his/her attention.
- Once finished, ask the pair to swap roles.
- Invite participants to respond to the exercise: What did they notice – as the speaker/ as the listener?

**Energy through verse lines**

**Aim**

As well as following punctuation when working on the text it is helpful and important to consider the metrical units or verse lines, as they are printed on the page.

A common trap for performers of Shakespeare is the temptation to pause or stop at the end of a printed line of verse. This can be exacerbated by our tendency in modern speech to downward inflect our sentences.

This exercise provides a simple way of driving through to the ends of lines, committing to the final words and passing energy on to the next line.

**Exercise – Kick bottle**

This works either as a solo or group task. If doing the exercise as a group:

- Start by reading the text around the circle, with each person taking one complete line of verse. Keep this order of speaking intact when you go on to move in the space.
- Put a soft but kickable object on the floor – for example a sponge ball, or an empty plastic bottle.
- Everyone walks in the space – keeping it fluid and balanced and at a good, high energy level. The person with the first line speaks it aloud, travelling towards the object as they do so. On the final word of their line they energetically kick the object. Then the performer with the next line immediately starts speaking, finding their way to the object wherever it may be, during their line – even if this means running.
- It’s important that the performers kick the object on the final word, not before or after.

What you will notice is the strong sense of drive through the lines as people travel towards the object, the commitment to final words and the energy that gets carried over to the next line.
Exploring opposition

Aim
This exercise provides a physical means of exploring how language is used actively to do something to another person.

Exercise 1 – Echoing oppositions

- Take a section of text which contains a set of oppositions you wish to explore. Allocate the actor or actors to read the piece and split the rest of the group into two halves. Instruct each half to listen for words, phrases or associations which fall under a certain heading. For example with Juliet’s “O serpent heart, hid with a flowering face” speech, the two headings might simply be “positive” and “negative”.

- In other speeches, the oppositions will be more specific. For example, for Philo’s speech at the beginning of Anthony and Cleopatra, you could listen out for anything to do with women/sex/lust versus war/fighting. When Claudio jilts Hero at the altar in Much Ado, you could listen out for anything to do with exterior/appearance/show versus interior/truth/reality.

- Once you have set up the oppositions that the group will be listening for, have your actor/s read the text aloud, while the two halves echo in a whisper anything they hear that has to do with their heading. The group doesn’t have to echo in unison: everyone will respond differently at different times. The aim is not to reach consensus but to explore the full range of possibilities regarding where the oppositions might land and interplay.

Exercise 2 – Between two chairs

A solo variation on this work is as follows:

- Set up two different points in the room, a few metres apart. This could be two chairs or two walls.

- As with the earlier punctuation given in Exercise 3, the actor has to be touching one of the two points in order to speak. Agree on what the oppositions are, eg positive versus negative, then ask the actor to move between the two points depending on what they are saying or thinking.
Exploring character objectives

Aim

To provide a physical means of:

- exploring characters’ intentions
- revealing subtexts
- showing how language is used actively to do something to another person.

Hint - If your performers do not yet know the lines of the scene you are working on you may want to set up a ‘ghosting’ or ‘feeding’ framework for this exercise, whereby two additional cast members, script in hand, read the lines into the ears of the characters who then speak them without scripts.

Exercise – Language as weapon

[Text 6]

- Working on a duologue, give each performer a set of Post It notes. Whenever they feel they have scored a hit, made a strong point or got one over on the opposite party, they place a sticky note on the shoulder of their ‘opponent’.

Sometimes when a character speaks they will not have earned a Post It hit. At other times, a single line may deserve more than one note. What is important is to make clear and specific choices about which one word or part of the line the hit is made.

Once you have been through the scene in this way, you can develop the exercise in two further stages.

- You can explore where on the body the note is placed – the forehead, the hand, the back, the throat and so on.
- You can play with the quality of how the note is attached. Is it a short stab, a slap, a slow and obvious blow, a surreptitious sleight of hand and so on.
Introducing plays to your class

AIM

This exercise is an active, more immediate alternative to a sit-down read through of the script at the beginning of the rehearsal process. The result of using this alternative is that students have a clear understanding of story and character journey from the beginning, before they have to grapple with the text.

Exercise – Side-coaching

- Side-coaching requires some preparation. You will obviously need to be familiar with the characters and narrative yourself. (This is where your facts, questions, entrances and exits, and events lists come in handy.) In addition, you may wish to have materials such as:
  - character name badges
  - key lines from the play printed off individually
  - important props or pieces of costume.

- Sit your group in a large circle and story-tell the narrative from beginning to end, describing each scene in turn. Allocate roles to members of the group and invite the different characters onto and off of the ‘stage’ at the appropriate times.

- When they are on the stage you can use any of a number of techniques to make the exercise more lively. For example:
  - hot-seating characters
  - questioning students who are not in role about how characters are thinking or feeling at major events in the play
  - getting the group to re-cap on the story
  - setting up ‘photograph’ poses for key events
  - exploring the relative status of characters by, for instance, giving pre-printed key lines from the script for actors to read out.

- As you go through the play keep checking with all the students, especially those not involved in the action, to make sure they are all up to speed.
Text excerpts

1. *The Winter’s Tale*, Act 2 Scene 1

LEONTES

How blest am I
In my just censure, in my true opinion!
Alack, for lesser knowledge! How accursed
In being so blest! There may be in the cup
A spider steeped, and one may drink, depart,
And yet partake no venom, for his knowledge
Is not infected: but if one present
The abhorred ingredient to his eye, make known
How he hath drunk, he cracks his gorge, his sides,
With violent hefts. I have drunk, and seen the spider.
Camillo was his help in this, his pander:
There is a plot against my life, my crown;
All’s true that is mistrusted: that false villain,
Whom I employed, was pre-employed by him:
He has discovered my design, and I
Remain a pinched thing; yea, a very trick
For them to play at will.

2. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act 2 Scene 1 (edited)

OBERON

Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania.

TITANIA

What, jealous Oberon! Fairies, skip hence:
I have forsworn his bed and company.

OBERON

Tarry, rash wanton: am not I thy lord?

TITANIA

Then I must be thy lady! Why art thou here,
Come from the farthest step of India?
But that, forsooth, the bouncing Amazon,
Your buskined mistress and your warrior love,
To Theseus must be wedded, and you come
To give their bed joy and prosperity.

OBERON

How canst thou thus for shame, Titania,
Glance at my credit with Hippolyta,
Knowing I know thy love to Theseus?

3. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act 1 Scene 1

EGEUS

Full of vexation come I, with complaint
Against my child, my daughter Hermia.
Stand forth, Demetrius. My noble lord,
This man hath my consent to marry her.
Stand forth, Lysander: and my gracious duke,
This man hath bewitch’d the bosom of my child;
Thou, thou, Lysander, thou hast given her rhymes,
And interchanged love-tokens with my child:
Thou hast by moonlight at her window sung,
With feigning voice verses of feigning love,
And stolen the impression of her fantasy
With bracelets of thy hair, rings, gawds, conceits,
Knacks, trifles, nosegays, sweetmeats, messengers
Of strong prevailment in unharden'd youth:
With cunning hast thou filch'd my daughter's heart,
Turn'd her obedience, which is due to me,
To stubborn harshness: and, my gracious duke,
Be it so; she will not here before your grace
Consent to marry with Demetrius,
I beg the ancient privilege of Athens,
As she is mine, I may dispose of her:
Which shall be either to this gentleman
Or to her death, according to our law
Immediately provided in that case.

4.  *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 3 Scene 2

JULIET  O serpent heart, hid with a flowering face!
Did ever dragon keep so fair a cave?
Beautiful tyrant! fiend angelical!
Dove-feathered raven! wolvish-ravening lamb!
Despised substance of divinest show!
Just opposite to what thou justly seemst,
A damned saint, an honourable villain!
O nature, what hadst thou to do in hell,
When thou didst bower the spirit of a fiend
In mortal paradise of such sweet flesh?
Was ever book containing such vile matter
So fairly bound? O that deceit should dwell
In such a gorgeous palace!

5.  *As You Like It*, Act 3 Scene 5

PHOEBE  Think not I love him, though I ask for him:
'Tis but a peevish boy; yet he talks well;
But what care I for words? Yet words do well
When he that speaks them pleases those that hear.
It is a pretty youth: not very pretty:
But, sure, he's proud, and yet his pride becomes him:
He'll make a proper man: the best thing in him
Is his complexion; and faster than his tongue
Did make offence his eye did heal it up.
He is not very tall; yet for his years he's tall:
His leg is but so so; and yet 'tis well.

6.  *King Richard III*, Act 1 Scene 2

LADY ANNE:  Vouchsafe, defused infection of a man,
For these known evils, but to give me leave,
By circumstance, to curse thy cursed self.
GLOUCESTER: Fairer than tongue can name thee, let me have
Some patient leisure to excuse myself.

LADY ANNE: Fouler than heart can think thee, thou canst make
No excuse current, but to hang thyself.

GLOUCESTER: By such despair, I should accuse myself.

LADY ANNE: And, by despairing, shouldst thou stand excused;
For doing worthy vengeance on thyself,
Which didst unworthy slaughter upon others.

GLOUCESTER: Say that I slew them not?

LADY ANNE: Why, then they are not dead:
But dead they are, and devilish slave, by thee.

GLOUCESTER: I did not kill your husband.

LADY ANNE: Why, then he is alive.

GLOUCESTER: Nay, he is dead; and slain by Edward's hand.

LADY ANNE: In thy foul throat thou liest: Queen Margaret saw
Thy murderous falchion smoking in his blood;
The which thou once didst bend against her breast,
But that thy brothers beat aside the point.

GLOUCESTER: I was provoked by her slanderous tongue,
Which laid their guilt upon my guiltless shoulders.

LADY ANNE: Thou wast provoked by thy bloody mind.
Which never dreamt on aught but butcheries:
Didst thou not kill this king?

GLOUCESTER: I grant ye.

LADY ANNE: Dost grant me, hedgehog? then, God grant me too
Thou mayst be damned for that wicked deed!
O, he was gentle, mild, and virtuous!

GLOUCESTER: The fitter for the King of heaven, that hath him.

LADY ANNE: He is in heaven, where thou shalt never come.

GLOUCESTER: Let him thank me, that hop to send him thither;
For he was fitter for that place than earth.

LADY ANNE: And thou unfit for any place but hell.

GLOUCESTER: Yes, one place else, if you will hear me name it.

LADY ANNE: Some dungeon.

GLOUCESTER: Your bed-chamber.