

## As If

ROBERT SHAUGHNESSY

*Guildford School of Acting, University of Surrey*

A couple of years ago I travelled from Canterbury to Nottingham to see Propeller's *Pocket Dream*. This is, as the company's publicity describes it, "a sixty-minute version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, especially devised for young audiences," one that aimed to "create a relaxed and engaging atmosphere... as well as encouraging the young audience to give an open and uninhibited response." As I am currently engaged in research into the increasingly prevalent phenomenon of Relaxed Performance, I was naturally interested to see how this might work. Relaxed Performance (or RP), for those unfamiliar with the term, is something that has begun to be offered by many theaters in the UK in recent years; designed primarily though not exclusively for young persons with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and their carers, an RP is one in which the usual protocols of audience behavior, and, sometimes, aspects of the show itself, will be adjusted to accommodate the needs of the condition. Thus, audience members are free to move about, to enter and leave the auditorium as necessary, and to make noise—this might well involve vociferous and blunt commentary on the show itself—and lighting and sound levels are adjusted to reflect autistic sensitivities. The idea is that RP encourages participation in an activity by a group that is habitually excluded from it, or that excludes itself from it; the understanding is that non-autistic, or, to use the terminology, neurotypical as opposed to neurodivergent, members of an RP show accept behavior that in usual circumstances would be censured or suppressed (Kempe).<sup>1</sup>

I had already seen *Pocket Dream* in Canterbury three weeks earlier, and knew what to expect: a fast-paced, cartoonish, sometimes puerile, genially enjoyable production, staged in a chalk circle with costume rails, tea chests, stepladders and assorted percussion, delivered by an all-male cast of six. A glance at the cast list confirmed a *dramatis personae* totaling

thirteen, with lovers, mechanicals and principal fairies, but no Egeus, no Philostrate, no Theseus and no Hippolyta. This will be interesting when they get to *Pyramus and Thisbe*, I thought; with the entire cast fully occupied as mechanicals, who will play their play audience? The solution lay in the co-option of us, the actual audience. In Canterbury, the actors came out of role and ushered two willing juveniles to step onto the stage, one male and one female, one Theseus and one Hippolyta. And because this was a Propeller show, Quince stated, handing out the costumes, they were cast across gender: a top hat for the girl Theseus, a feather boa for the boy Hippolyta. Their task was simply to sit at the top of the stepladders and watch, applaud, and, at the end of the mechanicals' play, rejoin the audience. In Canterbury, this is exactly what the two volunteers, grinning broadly throughout, did.

This, in Nottingham, is when things went, if not exactly wrong, then certainly not according to plan. Two volunteers, one boy, one girl, piped up straight away. The first sign of trouble was when Quince announced the cross-dressing business: there was no way, Propeller rules or not, that this boy was going to play a girl, nor this girl a boy. This was not ideal, but less disruptive than what happened next. Perched on his stepladder, this Theseus was under no illusions as to whom was now the real star of the show—and it wasn't Darrell Brockis as Bottom. The mechanicals' play was thus subjected to a running accompaniment of the kind of observations, insults and jokes that eight-year-old boys find hilarious: that's not a real sword, this is boring, you can't act, and so on. At first, the actors took this in good spirit and sportingly seemed to enjoy the game, but it wasn't long before they, and Brockis in particular, appeared to be struggling to conceal what I sensed was genuine irritation, as the boy's incessant and forceful interventions threatened to derail not only the play-within-the-play but the performance itself. Brockis eventually managed to silence his tormentor, and the play coasted to its finale and to a particularly vigorous round of applause. Post-show, in an appealingly inclusive gesture, we were invited into the performance space to play with the props, try on costumes, and chat with the actors. Does that usually happen, I asked. Never, one actor, turning slightly ashen, replied, we've never had anything like it.

Any RP audience has within it the scope for behaviors that make those of the mechanicals' courtly spectators look comparatively discreet; Andrew Kempe quotes the parent of one autistic child: "Ross does love the theatre, but we didn't take him a lot when he was small. Because, you know, you're sort of interrupting everyone else" (Kempe: 61). Quince's men's perfor-

mance is itself a prototype RP, in that interruption and disruption are a given, and they take pains to accommodate their audience's presumed hyper-sensitivities ("Will not the ladies be afeard of the lion?") by carefully framing their more extreme stage effects ("If you think I come hither as a lion, it were pity of my life. No, I am not such thing, I am a man, as other men are") (3.1.183, 194–5). I cannot know whether this particular stand-in for the Duke of Athens was really autistic, was pretending to be autistic, or was just having a laugh, but the incident demonstrates the importance, whenever audience participation is invited, of being careful what you wish for. Whether he knew the play or not, this Theseus's unscripted interventions metatheatrically performed exactly the function of those in Shakespeare's text; initially mildly amusing and indulgently tolerated, they became increasingly disruptive and annoying. The more the actors worked to keep *Pyramus and Thisbe* on track, the more genuine their predicament as performers became; the result was a performance of this scene more real, and more painful, than I can remember having experienced. It would be pleasant—perhaps—to report that this made it funnier than usual, but this was not the case at all. One part of me intellectually appreciated the irony of an audience of *Pyramus and Thisbe* equipped with, as it were, live ammunition rather than theatrical blanks; another part felt embarrassed, and irritated. For a moment, the distinctions between the theatrical and the real, and, specifically, between acted and real emotion, were no longer clear, or even tenable.

Without overstating the significance of a minor, one-off theatrical accident, I want to suggest that, by temporarily turning *Pyramus and Thisbe* into a real situation, it provides a point of departure for thinking about the "as if" that is the subject of my title, and some of the ideas of metatheatre which are the focus of this journal issue; the as if, as I will investigate, of our desire for a Shakespeare that might be performed as if it really belonged to us, as if it really mattered, as if, and if only, it could meet the urgent and immediate demands that we make upon it. "As if" is the cornerstone of the modern realist acting tradition: for Stanislavsky, "'if' is the lever which lifts us out of the world of reality into the only world in which we can be creative" (48). If the knife in your hand was sharp; if this piece of paper were the letter I'd been waiting for; if, as in one of Stanislavsky's foundational exercises, there really is a madman behind that door. For Sanford Meisner, whose rethinking of Stanislavsky has remained one of the most significant and credible legacies of the American Method, 'as if' is the key to particularization: "It's *as if* she were a five-year-old kid, and something dreadful happened to her." For

Meisner, as if is more than an actor's tool; it is a fundamental cognitive mechanism: "Catch yourself in real life. You're constantly talking *as if*... it was *as if* my heart stopped. See? It was *as if* I felt myself breaking into a cold sweat" (137, 144).

For both Stanislavsky and Meisner, "if" levers the real into the fictive, and the experience accessed corresponds exactly, approximately, or not at all, to character and dramatic situation. The point is not only that the action, and thus the character, the scene, the play, become believable and, if not real, then true, but also that by becoming so they gain a purpose, they matter. Stanislavsky and the Method, it has been argued, are ill-suited to Shakespeare, not least because they seem fundamentally at odds with its overt self-awareness,<sup>2</sup> but they nonetheless provide a particular "as if" that is widespread throughout Shakespearean performance today: the "as if" Shakespeare were our contemporary, the "as if" the plays were "written yesterday" (a phrase that has been proudly displayed on Propeller's website), the "as if," I want to suggest, Shakespeare were not Shakespeare.

### Shakespeare our contemporary

The desire runs deep for a Shakespeare that would work on and for us as if it were more like those forms of contemporary theater that many of us most admire, and possibly feel most challenged by, and less like all the things that we find awkward, disappointing or embarrassing about Shakespeare. In the 1960s, at the Royal Shakespeare Company, that desire took the form of a Shakespeare as if written by Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and, fleetingly, Antonin Artaud. In the 1980s, in the heyday of cultural materialism, it was a Shakespeare as if re-engineered by Bertolt Brecht. Today, if we are looking for a Shakespeare as if written yesterday, it might be imagined as by Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, or Susan-Lori Parks. Such a Shakespeare can be persuasively found in the directorial work of Thomas Ostermeier at the Schaubühne Berlin, whose visceral, visually stunning *Hamlet* is still playing to sell-out houses ten years after its 2008 premiere; Shakespeare belongs to a theater that, for Ostermeier, "results from...being able to recognize ourselves even if—and, I would say, in particular when—we did not know that we were like this, or even capable of that" (Boenisch and Ostermeier 156). As does Ostermeier, one might conceive of a Shakespeare as if it belongs to that category of performance that Hans-Thies Lehmann has identified as postdramatic theater, as if Shakespeare were kin to the late East German dramatist Heiner Müller, New York's The Wooster Group, and the United Kingdom's Forced Entertainment. As Lehmann lyrically expounds:

The impression of an open world without borders... is nearly always present in Shakespeare's theatre. Empires of thought and matter ...from those encompassing the world to the most banal...are travelled by this theatre... back and forth, between fairy tales and reality, dream and triviality, the cosmos and the inn, between Lear and Falstaff, the sublime and the inebriated, tragic and comic... ("Shakespeare's Grin" 104)

"It is just that kind of feeling one has when watching Forced Entertainment," Lehmann suggests, "for here too, the theatre is reaching effortlessly across the most varied areas imaginable, amalgamating wit, black humor, fear, and melancholy" (Lehmann 2004: 104). Perhaps one does have that feeling with Forced Entertainment, or, at least one did, some twenty years ago before the company became canonized and began to endlessly repeat itself, but how often does one have it with Shakespeare?

The answer, I suspect, is not very often. One of the defining characteristics of postdramatic theater, as Lehmann describes it, is the self-reflexivity it happens to share with Shakespeare's theater. It is more often than not a self-reflexivity of a distinctively disruptive kind, and one whose spirit is reflected in the title of the collection of writings on Forced Entertainment from which Lehmann's comments derive: *Not Even a Game Anymore*. In its refusal to articulate a self-contained, textually-determined world, postdramatic performance is frequently riven by what Lehmann calls the "irruption of the real," manifested through "the unsettling that occurs through the *undecidability* of whether one is dealing with reality or fiction": are the actors really drunk, or just pretending to be? are they acting, being themselves, or acting being themselves (*Postdramatic* 101)? It seems an apt analogy for the Shakespearean world of stage figures who repeatedly catch themselves out in a game that might be called acting, or who unexpectedly discover that what they thought was a game has turned deadly serious.

Implicated in situations in which something real—something delightful, something painful—may or may not be happening, the spectator of postdramatic theater is compelled

to wonder whether they should react to the events on stage as fiction (i.e. aesthetically) or as reality (for example, morally), theater's treading of the borderline of the real unsettles this crucial predisposition of the spectators: the...certainty and security in which they experience being spectators as an unproblematic social behavior. (*Lehmann Postdramatic* 104)

Importantly, characterized as it is by its embrace of the indeterminate, and by its refusal of fixed or final meanings, postdramatic theater practice

is open to the improvised, the spontaneous and the accidental, subject as much to the contingencies of situation and event rather as to the determinations of script. For Lehmann, this ambiguous and volatile deployment of the real to unsettle established certainties and securities is an index of postdramatic theater's forcefulness and its immediacy, but also, crucially, of its efficacy, its politics, and its value. Viewed in this light as no longer or not even a game, postdramatic metatheatre offers a model of how Shakespeare's might have worked, or might be made to work.

### Shakespeare in Rehearsal

Although no-one involved would have thought of it as a postdramatic moment, the *Pocket Dream* incident is an example of how the unexpected irruption of the real in a Shakespeare performance can generate an unusual, and not altogether agreeable, affective intensity; in this instance within the context of temporarily transformed protocols of audience behavior and performer-audience interaction. In this respect it shares an affinity with an area of Shakespearean performance-making that, since public performance itself often proves disappointing, is increasingly attracting attention as the domain in which the pleasures and the possibilities of the immediate, the spontaneous and the real may be more fully witnessed and experienced. I refer to what has until recently been for most Shakespeare scholars a largely uncharted world: rehearsal. This is a domain from which academics have for the most part been excluded, and it can sometimes seem the place (perhaps the only place) where a really immediate Shakespeare can be found. In his contribution to a special issue of *Shakespeare Bulletin* on the topic, Rob Conkie states that rehearsal "exceeds performance as a means of imaginative, interpretative and affective engagement with Shakespeare's plays," and quotes Gay McAuley and Oliver Ford Davies to this effect: for the former, rehearsals "often provide more powerful and compelling theatre than the performances I see in the theatre," for the latter, recalling experiences of working in the RSC's conference hall space, "some of the run-throughs I watched in there are among the most thrilling theatrical experiences I have ever had" (Conkie 411–12; McAuley 10; Ford Davies 109). This power, I suggest, is closely allied to Lehmann's notion of indeterminacy: rehearsal can be the place where, pre-eminently, boundaries and binaries (between, amongst much else, playing and working, performing and not-performing, self and role, felt and displayed emotion) are constantly open to re-negotiation and redefinition, the place where "the unsettling that occurs through the

*undecidability* of whether one is dealing with reality or fiction” (Lehmann *Postdramatic* 101) can be at its most intense, its most productive, and, occasionally, its most painful. Rehearsal, by its very nature, is always already metatheatrical.

To draw upon recent personal experience again, I witnessed something like this in action as an observer in the rehearsal room during the research and development phase of Flute Theatre’s 2015–16 production of *Hamlet*, which was directed by Kelly Hunter, and co-produced with English Touring Theatre.<sup>3</sup> This was a cut version, running at an interval-free ninety minutes, played by a cast of six, and described as “a chamber production” that was aimed at “audiences that may have suffered grief and trauma.”<sup>4</sup> The drama is that of seven characters: Hamlet (Mark Quartley), Claudius (Greg Hicks), Gertrude (Kate Miles), Ophelia (Francesca Zoutewelle), Laertes (Chris MacDonald, whose role absorbs a great deal of Horatio, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and the First Player), and Polonius and the Gravedigger (both played by Tom Hodgkins). The Ghost (as in Richard Eyre’s 1980 Royal Court production) was ventriloquized by Hamlet himself; the action took place in real time in a single room furnished with a black leather sofa, on the night of Claudius and Gertrude’s wedding (the template, Hunter stated, was the 1998 Danish film drama of familial abuse, *Festen*).

The idiom of the production was emotional realism, cultivated through a technique that, in Hunter’s words, aims “to allow you to capture the dynamic movement of thought from mind to mouth, as if you are speaking your thoughts for the very first time, embedded within which are your feelings” (Hunter 2015: xii). As always, *as if* is doing a lot of work here, and it invokes a mode of Shakespearean performance that has been both interrogated and reclaimed in recent years: according to one point of view, as an ideologically-suspect and anachronistic practice that is fundamentally at odds with plays and *dramatis personae* that are discontinuous, metatheatrical and self-contradictory; and, according to another, as the way in which most actors work, whether we historically-aware and theoretically-savvy Shakespeare scholars like it or not. Realist acting is discredited, from the former perspective, because it trades in the “notion of constant, interiorized ‘character’” and “psychologically complex individuals,” rather than acknowledging that “early modern conceptions of individual personality were founded more in layers of social construction and ‘self-fashioning’” (Barker, Solga, and Mazer 574). If the evidence of the Flute *Hamlet* rehearsals is anything to go by, however (and I dare say it is replicated in rehearsal rooms across the globe), the theory of the

self-contained character has little bearing upon the on-the-feet business of making Shakespearean personae; and, indeed, that this business is fundamentally a matter of social dialogue. Much of the critique of “character,” I suggest, stems more from what practitioners *say* rather than what performers *do*; in practice, the effect of character is created in action and behavior, in what Meisner calls “the reality of doing” (Meisner: 16). For Meisner, it is only in action, and interaction, that character exists; character is not a fixed point but a process, not integral, self-propelled and self-contained but relational, a sequence of transactions, something that emerges from the interplay between performers, that is not individually owned but mutually constitutive, and that exists in the space between them.

An example of this was the work on the graveside sequence, in this production’s staging of 5.1. As framed by the production, this was a complexly layered, Pirandellian scene. As mentioned earlier, the First Gravedigger was doubled with Polonius, who had met his end in the closet scene behind the sofa, and who had remained prone onstage ever since (Ophelia entered the scene of her disintegration by crawling out from beneath her father’s body); the episode began with Tom Hodgkins singing and springing to life, prompting those of us watching to wonder whether he was the Gravedigger or Polonius’s ghost, and indeed whether Hamlet was dreaming or hallucinating the sequence.<sup>5</sup> Seated at a large table piled with editions of the play, old family photographs, secondary works (Montaigne’s *Essays*, R. D. Laing’s *The Divided Self*), and biscuits, Mark and Tom ping-ponged the dialogue between crunches of ginger nuts and sips of tea, acting and not acting, stopping and starting, backtracking, trying a line this way, then that. And then, on “he that is mad” (5.1.118), Mark turned to Kelly: “Does he know that I know that he knows who I am?,” prompting Chris, following the dialogue from the other side of the table, to chip in with an impromptu snatch of the Kursaal Flyers’ (1976) only hit “Little does she know”: “*Little does she know that I know that she knows that I know she’s two-timing me...*”

As throughout the rehearsals, there was a doubleness, at least, to “I” and “he”: Mark and/or Hamlet; Tom and/or the Gravedigger, and/or Polonius, as the actors slipped rapidly in and out of selves and roles, ranging between the first, second and third persons as they addressed themselves to each other, Mark assuming and discarding Hamlet by a shift of the angle of his head, Hamlet becoming and unbecoming Mark by transferring his center of gravity. Directing Mark in his big solo, the first encounter with the internalized Ghost, Kelly pondered Hamlet’s sit-

ting position on the sofa: “less altar boy, more Mark, more you,” and Mark relaxed his elbows, lounged backwards. Moments such as these remind us that Lehmann’s principle of *undecidability* is less a distinctive property of the postdramatic than an inherent potentiality of all theater, even at its most realist. Or, as W. B. Worthen puts it in his interrogation of Lehmann, “the intransigent materiality of performance, its tendency to remain fully visible alongside the *mimesis* of the text’s represented narrative, is an intrinsic part of dramatic theatre” (6). In one sense, the implication is that *all* theater is inherently metatheatrical, and is differentiated by the extent to which it attempts to flaunt, or suppress, this; more narrowly (and perhaps more usefully), the juxtaposition of postdramatic and early modern deepens and enriches our understanding of both.

The reality of doing in this rehearsal process, as I suspect it is in many, was simultaneously to do Shakespeare and not do him, or rather, perhaps, to do Shakespeare and do Shakespeare as if it were not Shakespeare. On the one hand, meticulous attention was paid to the words on the page, to meter, rhythm, prosody; on the other, there was a constant process of parsing and paraphrasing, quick-witted seizing for an apt analogy, and of temporarily rendering the dialogue as if rehearsing a modern play, probably by Ravenhill or Kane. Hamlet’s “O, most wicked speed...” (1.2.156) becomes “it’s as if you’re saying ‘you fucking bitch, screwing my uncle’”; Guildenstern’s “My lord, I cannot...” (3.2.312; here assigned to Laertes) is “I’m like, fuck off”; Gertrude’s “What wilt thou do...” (3.4.19) translates as “What the fuck are you going to do to me?” Putting the “f” into “as if” was the order of the day in this rehearsal room; this was not, I think, because Mark Quartley, Kelly Hunter and Greg Hicks are more habitually foul-mouthed than most actors (or, for that matter, academics), but because it is a means of transcoding Shakespearean text as targeted action and physical impulse, exercised in the expectation that the emotionally-saturated performative force of the f-word will itself in turn energize the text. Whether in rehearsal or performance, moreover, a swear word is a quintessential “irruption of the real”; it can never be contained within the fictions within which it is uttered, and, as research in the cognitive psychology of swearing has found, as “a form of emotional language” (Stephens and Zile: 993) it works at a visceral, even primal, level in and on the bodies of speakers and listeners.

### The wound is open

Hunter’s account of how the actor makes Shakespeare’s words her own resonates with those of many other contemporary acting manuals, but she

qualifies and complicates it with a line from an early piece on Shakespeare by Harold Pinter: “The wound is open. The wound is peopled” (Hunter: xii; Pinter: 7). Pinter’s essay, which was written in 1950 but not published in its own right until 1998,<sup>6</sup> is an cryptic but extraordinarily suggestive meditation on Shakespeare’s fundamental strangeness: the “mistake they make,” he writes, “is to attempt to determine and calculate, with the finest instruments, the source of the wound”; instead, by accepting its openness, the actor finds in it “a long corridor of postures... broody with government; severe; fantastical; paralytic; voluptuous; impassive; muscle-bound; lissom; virginal; unwashed; bewildered; humpbacked; icy and statuesque,” all of which are “contained in the wound which Shakespeare does not attempt to sew up or re-shape, whose pain he does not attempt to eradicate.” Shakespeare, Pinter speculates, is at once the embodiment of authority (“a traffic policemen; a rowing blue; a rear-gunner”) and its subversive antithesis (“a lunatic; a deserter, a conscientious objector; a guttersnipe”); “he meanders, he loses his track, he overshoots his mark, he drops his glasses, he meets himself coming back...is carried home drunk”; he “repeats the Bible sideways” and “scratches his head with an iceberg”; his writing is “blade-edged, one-legged...whimsical, acrimonious, wintry, malicious, fearsome, blighted.” And yet: “The fabric never breaks. The wound is open. The wound is peopled” (Pinter: 5–7). Set alongside Lehmann’s vision of the postdramatic Shakespearean cosmos, Pinter’s response images a Shakespeare “in its entirety” (5) as irrupted by the real but beyond realism, as a void space inhabited by madness, profanity, ecstasy, and pain. For Hunter, Pinter’s recognition is that “Shakespeare himself is ultimately unknowable, and the mistake too often made is attempting to define him on our own terms” (Hunter: xii). Those terms may, on the face of it, be those of emotional realism; Shakespeare invites the actor through and beyond them, solicits him to embrace “fleeting, fragile and questionable subjects constructed in an instant instead of rounded characters” (Lehmann 2004: 103), asks her to “keep the wound open” (Hunter: xii).

It is, of course, a lot to ask. As I have indicated, “as if” as a mechanism can seem both magically simple and potentially dangerous; in the contexts of postdramatic theater and Shakespearean metatheatre, it can as much collapse as reinforce the distinction between what is real and what is fictive. If so, this suggests elements of a vocabulary through which the works’ vertiginous self-referentiality might be accessed and unlocked. But, as the cast of Propeller’s *Pocket Dream* discovered, laying oneself open can in some circumstances invite a little too much reality. If we should not be

surprised that the mainstream of most contemporary Shakespeare-making will prefer not to opt for the more dangerous route, there is much to be gained from acting as if it might.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>In the interests of full disclosure, I admit to a personal and professional stake in this research; I saw *Pocket Dream* with my then-fourteen-year-old son, Gabriel, who is profoundly autistic and whose first experience of Shakespeare this was. As far as I could tell, he appeared to enjoy it, in that he managed forty minutes before needing some time out, and he didn't once decide to liven things up by breaking into song.

<sup>2</sup>For a succinct review of current debates, see Mazer.

<sup>3</sup>The research and development phase took place from April to May 2015, culminating in a single performance for an invited audience at the Arcola Theatre on 8 May. This version, now titled *Hamlet, who's there?*, was performed at the Gdansk Shakespeare Festival in August 2015, at a variety of international festivals thereafter, and finally at the Trafalgar Studios, London, in December 2016.

<sup>4</sup>For the published script, see Shakespeare and Hunter.

<sup>5</sup>In this production, Yorick's skull was that of a family dog, produced from the Gravedigger's pocket. When the idea was introduced in the first read-through of the scene, "He hath bore me on his back a thousand times" (5.1.152) had the cast in stitches; here was one Yorick that was "wont to set the table on a roar" (5.1.156).

<sup>6</sup>Martin Esslin quotes the essay at length in his critical study of Pinter, and derives its title from it (see Esslin: 54–55).

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