

# LETTER FROM THE CHALK FACE: DIRECTING *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM* AT THE STAUNTON BLACKFRIARS

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The writings of theatre practitioners are letters from the chalk face rather than 'theories'. Practitioners practise first, and make their discoveries on the studio or rehearsal-room floor in much the same way as the scientist conducts experiments in a laboratory. However, these are not as readily codifiable as a scientific experiment, where a mathematical equation may offer a solution to the problem. In theatre, experiments constitute a constant search which will never reach a quantifiable conclusion. Experiments may, however, reach a qualitative conclusion: 'it works or it doesn't' is the maxim, where the measuring stick is an informed artistic sensibility.<sup>1</sup>

I find Dymphna Callery's confidence in the 'informed artistic sensibility' encouraging, because I am a theatre practitioner. I direct plays. In my parallel career as an academic working in the UK higher education sector, I have found that 'letters from the chalk face' such as Callery describes are included in a wider range of outputs and publications known collectively as 'practice-as-research'. My own practice-as-research methodology typically takes three forms: firstly, I search for practical solutions to perceived challenges presented by textual, material and logistical elements of plays in production; secondly, I follow my own curiosity and desire to create something genuinely new, in productions that speak directly to their audiences; thirdly, I attempt to record and contextualize some of the discoveries made in the rehearsal room, in print publications. This particular 'letter from the chalk face' shares my experience and reflections on practice, rather than labouring with theory, but this is not to suggest that the substance of what follows

is purely anecdotal and reflective. Rather, this article considers a range of playable solutions to a set of perceived challenges posed by a Shakespearian text, in this case, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Further, the article suggests ways in which theatre practice can refresh (rather than reject) certain established literary-critical readings of the text, giving them renewed dramatic agency.

My work in the theatre supports Callery's view that '[t]he rejection of theory does not mean the rejection of training. Quite the reverse, in fact . . . training is fundamental'<sup>2</sup> because my work as a director is methodologically linked to my ongoing activities as an acting coach. So what follows is an examination of the role played by specific strands of modern actor training techniques in an 'original practices' production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which played at the American Shakespeare Center's reconstructed Blackfriars Playhouse in Staunton, Virginia,<sup>3</sup> as part of a year-long national tour of the USA.

The role of modern actor training has been largely overlooked in the critical discussion of the 'original practices' approach to Shakespearian

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<sup>1</sup> Dymphna Callery, *Through the Body: A Practical Guide to Physical Theatre* (London, 2007), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Callery, *Through the Body*, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> I directed the production in 2006 for the American Shakespeare Center on Tour. The production opened and closed at the reconstructed Blackfriars Playhouse in Staunton, VA, and in between enjoyed a nine-month run, playing in venues across the USA. A recording of the production's première performance is held in the American Shakespeare Center's archives.

performance in today's reconstructed early modern theatres. On one level, this should hardly be surprising; the 'modern' aspect alone offends a historical sense of authenticity, and a modern understanding of actor training differs radically from the experience of the early modern acting apprentice as articulated by the best scholarship we have. John H. Astington identifies the historical gap between modern theatre practice and the experience of the early modern players. Astington locates 'original work on text and character simultaneously with attention to an ensemble style, overseen by one guiding intelligence, the kind of approach practised at the Royal Shakespeare Company, for example, from about 1960 onwards' as a practice invented in the nineteenth century by the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen.<sup>4</sup> Scholarship enjoys a close (if occasionally vexed) relationship with what might be called 'original practices-as-research' at the reconstructed Globe and Blackfriars, and when the subject of actor training surfaces in relation to the first ten years of performance at the Bankside Globe, Christie Carson emphasizes the primacy of theatre architecture in the complex of meaning-making at the Globe, suggesting that '[s]tandard acting training becomes inadequate, even detrimental, in this space'.<sup>5</sup> While such a statement reflects a popular and attractive appraisal of the Globe as a unique performance space, it does not necessarily reflect the experience of many of the actors involved.

Later in the same volume, the actor Paul Chahidi offers a different perspective. For him, the specific technical challenges of the Globe space offer opportunities to hone established techniques:

you have to flex all your acting muscles in a way you definitely would not have to in a conventional theatre. Because you do not have lighting to help you and tell the audience where to look, you just have some other actors, the costume and the music . . . It really forces you to work out your techniques, your voice production, the way you would use an audience.<sup>6</sup>

I would agree with Chahidi's assessment and go further, to suggest that this period of Globe

production was in fact underpinned by a range of widely disseminated actor training principles. In the capacity of Head of Research at the Globe from 1990–2002, it was my job to document the development of the productions and the performers, in the *Globe Research Bulletin* series.<sup>7</sup> Leaving aside a consideration of the collective training experiences of the acting companies themselves, it should be noted that the theatre's first artistic directorate instituted ongoing, season-long, on the job training for the actors, in the form of verse classes with Giles Block, movement classes with Glynn Macdonald, jig choreography with Sian Williams and voice classes with Stewart Pearce.<sup>8</sup> At the risk of over-simplifying the contributions of these individuals (who, like their actor-clients, draw on a very wide range of training and professional experience) it is fair to say that, at the very least, the actors' work at the Globe has been informed by the approach to verse speaking pioneered by Peter Hall, the movement training system of F. M. Alexander, the dance training and notation system developed by Rudolf Laban, and the voice work of Cicely Berry, since at least 1999.

But this does not alter the fact that modern actor training methodologies still fail to register in most serious discussions of the 'original practices' performances at the reconstructed theatres. This could be due to the connection between modern training regimes and modern rehearsal approaches; with respect to the latter, Don Weingust suggests that to adopt any systematic approach to group rehearsal

<sup>4</sup> John H. Astington, *Actors and Acting in Shakespeare's Time: The Art of Stage Playing* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 140.

<sup>5</sup> Christie Carson and Farah Karim-Cooper, eds., *Shakespeare's Globe: A Theatrical Experiment* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Rylance, Yolanda Vazquez and Paul Chahidi, 'Discoveries from the Globe Stage', in Carson and Karim-Cooper, eds., *Shakespeare's Globe*, pp. 204–5.

<sup>7</sup> The *Globe Research Bulletin* series can be found at [www.globelink.org/research/researchbulletins/](http://www.globelink.org/research/researchbulletins/) (accessed 12.10.11).

<sup>8</sup> Many other freelance voice and movement specialists (too numerous to name here) have contributed to the work of individual productions at the Globe, but the practitioners named here have provided a kind of methodological continuum over the past decade or so.

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is to take an anachronistic step which compromises any engagement with early modern theatre practice. In Weingust's view, Patrick Tucker's Original Shakespeare Company (OSC) has developed a historically informed model of rehearsal which emphasizes private study over group rehearsal, and as such, this model has a distinct advantage over the Globe's more recognizably modern rehearsal methods.<sup>9</sup> In an argument that engages with W. B. Worthen's understanding of performativity<sup>10</sup> Weingust argues that the OSC's approach,

while involving a most detailed attention to their written texts, eliminates many of the other elements of production input that stabilize the performance texts of most contemporary western theatres. Without a codifying rehearsal regimen, OSC work is more greatly variable in performance, the audience a much larger factor in the schema, having more immediate bearing on the production of the OSC performance text.<sup>11</sup>

Weingust seems to be suggesting that an actor working within conventional rehearsal structures is less able to bring variety to subsequent iterations of his/her performance, because structured group rehearsals necessarily undermine the role of the live audience in the process of making meaning. Director Mike Alfreds recognizes that audiences 'have a will of their own . . . and the energy of their collective concentration has a huge influence on the nature of a performance',<sup>12</sup> but he argues that the best way for the actor to engage with the audience is through extensive preparation in group rehearsals:

I believe, in fact I *know* from my own practice, that a production can be developed through rehearsals in such rich depth that the WORLD OF THE PLAY becomes profoundly absorbed into the actors' psyches. They feel so familiar with this world, its space, its conventions and the relationships within it, that it gives them the security to play openly and freely every night. The external structure of fixed patterns and deliveries is replaced by strong inner structures. Each performance should be a *disciplined* improvisation in which the 'what' (text and, to a certain degree, ACTIONS and OBJECTIVES) remains unchanged, but the 'how' (the execution of these) can vary . . . The performance is open to the possibility of

increased fluidity, sudden revelation, greater intensity, *creative joy*.<sup>13</sup>

The emphatic strength of Alfreds's convictions may be inferred from his typographical choices in the quote above. His vocabulary reflects the influence of Stanislavski (amongst others) in his own work, and his practice – developed in the 1970s through his company Shared Experience and later disseminated through his activities as a freelance director at the RSC, the National and the Globe – has influenced the work of many directors, including my own. Budgetary constraints as well as the 'original practices' brief adopted by the American Shakespeare Center (ASC) at the Blackfriars effectively vetoed the ten weeks of rehearsal implied in Alfreds's preferred model, but I was able to adapt my own model to a three-week period of structured group rehearsals, to give the actors the best chance to explore a range of playable choices. This seemed to me to be the best way to equip the actors with the necessary confidence to choose the most appropriate action, spontaneously and appropriately, in the moment of performance itself. It has been my experience – and, I would venture, that of many actors – that the more thorough the preparation, the better able the performer is to act with real 'immediacy' and the kind of spontaneity that Weingust attributes to the OSC's productions. The key function shared by most modern rehearsal structures and most actor training methodologies is to equip the actor with that essential confidence, the confidence to play.

The ASC's reconstructed Blackfriars Playhouse is in many respects an entirely different animal

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<sup>9</sup> For a comprehensive account of the Original Shakespeare Company's approach to performance, see Patrick Tucker, *Secrets of Acting Shakespeare* (London, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> See W. B. Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* (Cambridge, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Don Weingust, *Acting from Shakespeare's First Folio: Theory, Text and Performance* (London, 2006), p. 121.

<sup>12</sup> Mike Alfreds, *Different Every Night: Freeing the Actor* (London, 2007), p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> Alfreds, *Different Every Night*, p. 25.

to the reconstructed Globe, and the ASC's own experiments with 'original stage practices' occupy a central position within the company's mission; this is arguably no longer the case at the Bankside Globe. The ASC is prescriptive about its 'house style' of performance, and engages directly with current scholarship on early modern theatre practice, going so far as to write elements of this into its contractual agreements with actors. As I have discussed elsewhere,<sup>14</sup> the ASC's 'Actors' Renaissance Season' represents the company's most rigorous experiment to date with the kind of rehearsal practices set out by Tiffany Stern,<sup>15</sup> and for these productions the very brief period of group rehearsal allows little time for ensemble work to address more than basic staging.

As a guest director for both the touring and resident troupes at the ASC, I have directed at the Blackfriars on several occasions in recent years.<sup>16</sup> My work there and elsewhere is decidedly low-tech, prioritizing actors' contributions to narrative and characterization over designers' contributions to metaphor and concept. So, in most important respects my approach is highly compatible with the ASC house style, which, in espousing its own definition of 'original practices', eschews sets, lighting and other mod cons. But important differences between the 'house' approach and my own remain, with regard to the role of actor training methodologies. Though the ASC's house style certainly embraces current scholarship on early modern performance practice, it contains no formal recognition of current actor training techniques.

Outside of professional directing work, I have spent much of the last fifteen years coaching actors in training. This has obviously shaped my directing style, determined how I speak to actors, and influenced the way I look at performance more generally. I don't so much direct as facilitate, and I do a lot of coaching in rehearsals. It has been my experience that prioritizing the actors' performances, their ownership of their words, and their relationships with their audiences is an engrossing and satisfying way to work, regardless of the venue or performance context. It is an ergonomic way

to work, as it makes use of the training structures common to so many different institutions, and as I will explain, it sometimes obviates the need for elaborate directorial 'concepts'.

#### METHODOLOGIES, NOT CONCEPTS

One of the truisms modern directors of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* face sooner rather than later is that the play demands three carefully delineated 'worlds'. More often than not, this demand is met with recourse to modern theatre technology, and big concepts. The 2011 RSC production<sup>17</sup> employed kaleidoscopic lighting gobos to signal when magical forces are at work, with a leather sofa transforming into a kind of vertical shuttle between the mortal and fairy worlds. The RST's fly system was put to further use as chairs painted in primary colours were flown in to various heights, to suggest a forest of the imagination.

But another truism directors of plays by Shakespeare may encounter is that conceptualizing any production can be an exercise in diminishing returns. According to this view, sooner or later, a line, a character or even great swathes of text will emerge which need to be cut because it/they will not fit the chosen conceptual framework. 'Our gods must not be concepts but the words that are in the text',<sup>18</sup> warns Barton and, while I am never shy

<sup>14</sup> See 'The Actors' Renaissance Season at the Blackfriars Playhouse', in *Performing Early Modern Drama Today*, ed. Pascale Aebischer and Kathryn Prince (Cambridge, forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup> The ASC contract includes quotations from Tiffany Stern, *Making Shakespeare: From Stage to Page* (London, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> I directed the touring productions of *Much Ado About Nothing* (2005–06) and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2006–07), as well as *Love's Labour's Lost* (2007) for the resident company. As a member of the teaching faculty in ASC's partnership MLitt/MFA programme with Mary Baldwin College, I also directed three MFA showcase productions, *Twelfth Night* (2006), *Hamlet* (2007) and *King Lear* (2008).

<sup>17</sup> The production was directed by Nancy Meckler, designed by Katrina Lindsay, with lighting by Wolfgang Göbbel.

<sup>18</sup> John Barton, *Playing Shakespeare* (London, 1984), p. 23.

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about cutting Shakespeare's scripts,<sup>19</sup> the notion of a 'concept' imposed by a director remains a vexed one for me. However, I have found that training methodologies import a structure into the work in rehearsal very much as concepts can, without imposing the kind of creative restrictions which concepts often bring with them.

To put it another way, staging concepts most typically manifest themselves in concrete visual or aesthetic *forms*, whereas methodologies are typically manifested as playable *activities*. If a company of actors are all engaged in the same activity, each can find his/her own expression of that activity, rather than having to repeat a form, with varying degrees of success. I have found that methodological structures, manifested as activities, provide a happy and fruitful 'freedom within structure' for the actor. Back in 1984 Barton reminded his actors that 'although it's up to us to analyse the verse as well as we can, in the end we must treat it intuitively. We must trust it and let it be organic rather than conscious',<sup>20</sup> and it is this kind of thinking which still informs the frequent comparisons between accomplished jazz musicians and good Shakespearian actors. In fact, I would argue that 'freedom within structure' is now as distinctly a Shakespearian 'concept' as any current working definition of 'original stage practices'. So, actor training methodologies have a lot to offer Shakespeare's plays in rehearsal, especially for those productions which embrace aspects of 'original practices' research, precisely because they provide structures designed to support, amplify and make legible a range of individual actors' creative impulses.

Using the experience of directing this play for the ASC's touring company, I will demonstrate how actor training techniques help actors to delineate and reveal character, create a sense of place and establish helpfully different modes of storytelling. In performance conditions which do not include or embrace 'high production values', actor training techniques can help a director side-step some of the potential pitfalls associated with that conceptual hurdle, the 'three worlds' of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

### DIRECTING A *MIDSUMMER* *NIGHT'S DREAM* FOR THE ASC TOURING TROUPE

The vocabulary of my rehearsal room was drawn from widely disseminated actor training techniques common to a large number of American conservatories, but specifically that developed by Rudolf Laban (1879–1958). Laban's approach to theatre-making is not exactly avant-garde these days, but in its somatic foundation it differs considerably from the psychologically motivated, post-Stanislavski school of occidental realism. Laban's theories on movement are extensive, and have found many different applications in dance, theatre and physical education pedagogy, but my own use of Laban technique is limited to what he calls the eight effort actions.<sup>21</sup>

As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>22</sup> the application of Laban's eight effort actions to Shakespearian text not only emphasizes the inherent rhythmic possibilities contained in the text, it also emphasizes the extent to which the way words sound and feel determines their meaning in the theatre. As such, I found it a useful comprehensive approach to use for *Dream*. Laban's effort actions became the *lingua franca* of our rehearsal room.

To choose the appropriate Laban effort action for a particular segment of text, one must first consider whether the effort may be described as direct or indirect. To illustrate the difference between the two, it might be useful to imagine the efforts of a tennis player as direct, and the efforts of the ball s/he hits as indirect. Next, the performer must

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<sup>19</sup> My recent work includes a 90-minute version of *Antony and Cleopatra* for two actors and a musician, which opened at the 2010 International Shakespeare Conference.

<sup>20</sup> Barton, *Playing Shakespeare*, p. 46.

<sup>21</sup> For more information on Laban's methodology, see Rudolf Laban, *The Mastery of Movement*, 4th edition revised and enlarged by Lisa Ullmann (Plymouth, MA, 1998). For more on the eight effort actions, see Rudolf Laban and F. C. Lawrence, *Effort* (Plymouth, MA, 1974).

<sup>22</sup> See 'The Early Modern Physical Theatre', in *Speaking Pictures: the Visual/Verbal Nexus of Dramatic Performance*, ed. V. M. Vaughan, F. Cioni and J. Bessell (Cranbury, 2010), pp. 181–201.

decide whether the effort is strong (as if moving against resistance) or weak (moving against no resistance). This might be described as the difference between walking through treacle and walking through air. Finally, the performer must choose between a sudden effort and a sustained effort, for example the difference between knocking on a door (sudden) and trying to push a door open (sustained). When these three pairs of components are combined, eight archetypal effort actions emerge:

In other words, the efforts defined how the fairies moved, but also how they spoke. Choral movement for Titania's 'train' of fairies could be generated by the actors in less time than it would take to learn formal choreography by rote, simply by asking all of the fairies to adopt the same effort action for a given period of time. This movement provided a physical underscore for the entrance and exit of Titania and her train in 2.1. The movement was itself enhanced by the sound of the fairy train

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Direct + Strong + Sudden = Punching	Indirect + Strong + Sudden = Slashing
Direct + Weak + Sudden = Dabbing	Indirect + Weak + Sudden = Flicking
Direct + Strong + Sustained = Pressing	Indirect + Strong + Sustained = Wringing
Direct + Weak + Sustained = Gliding	Indirect + Weak + Sustained = Floating

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Laban's effort actions are effective tools for performers wishing to expand their vocal and somatic palette. Laban's labels come from observation of course, and readers might usefully reflect for a moment on their own habitual patterns (some of us are by nature punchers; others, left to our own devices, are floaters, and so on) before considering the extent to which the Laban efforts can assist performers seeking to break with their own habitual patterns of vocal or physical behaviour. By limiting the variables to three pairs of components and therefore eight archetypal patterns, Laban provides performers with that most valuable commodity: freedom within structure. The effort actions are not repeatable forms but repeatable qualities of movement, with endless possibilities for individual variation and adjustment. The efforts might in fact be best described as activities in which all performers can engage, without fear of replicating or contradicting anyone else's engagement with the same activity.

Another advantage in using this technique is that it allows for the same notation system to be used for vocal work. So, the somatic and vocal aspects of Laban's approach offered us transformative possibilities in physical and vocal aspects of characterization that would prove invaluable in creating the 'other worldliness' of Titania, Oberon and the fairies.

breathing together, again using the effort actions. Usually, performers adopted the same effort for breath as for movement, but occasionally it seemed theatrically interesting, for instance, to have Titania's train advance as one on Oberon, using a sustained pressing effort, while breathing audibly with a lighter, sudden, dabbing effort.

Laban efforts also help performers find something playable in passages of well-beloved poetry (which can all too often feel more like poisoned chalices than gifts to the actor). I have included the effort action annotation for the speech below, illustrating choices played by Henry Bazemore as Oberon. At this point, readers may wish to withdraw to a place where they may not be overheard, and try this orchestration out for themselves:

[FLOAT] I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,  
 Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,  
 Quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine,  
 With sweet musk-roses, and with eglantine.  
 [GLIDE] There sleeps [DAB] Titania sometime of  
 the night,  
 [GLIDE] Lulled in these flowers with dances  
 and delight;  
 [DAB] And there the snake throws her enamelled skin,  
 [FLOAT] Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in;  
 [WRING] And with the juice of this I'll streak  
 her eyes,

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And make her full of hateful fantasies.  
[DAB] Take thou some of it, and seek through this  
grove.  
[GLIDE] A sweet Athenian lady is in love  
[PUNCH] With a disdainful youth. [DAB] Anoint his  
eyes;  
But do it when the next thing he espies  
May be the lady. (2.1.249–63)

To help establish the language of Laban from day one of rehearsals, I replaced the typical first read-through of the play with a 45-minute workshop, guiding the actors through each of the key methodological strands that would underpin the rehearsal period – specifically, approaches to verbal and somatic storytelling. Taken as a whole, the range of exercises worked through in this 45-minute primer provided an extremely time-efficient means of establishing a common technical vocabulary within the group. The company moved forward into all subsequent rehearsals with a shared set of technical references, which in turn expedited the process of giving directorial notes towards the end of the rehearsal period. Small or radical adjustments to what the audience will ultimately read as the playing style could be prompted using the same specific technical vocabulary in notes to the actor.

As Laban effort actions are rooted in somatic impulses, using them as a foundation can make other kinds of somatic approaches to characterization easier to develop in subsequent rehearsals. The most physically expansive element of the actors' work for *Dream* was in the area of animal work.

### ANIMAL WORK

This describes an approach to physical characterization which is hard to document, but exceedingly easy to pastiche. Nigel Planer's monstrous creation and *nom-de-plume* Nicholas Craig does this better than most, in the thinly-veiled parody of Simon Callow's autobiography, *Being An Actor*. In a section ostensibly addressed 'To the Young Actor',

Craig gives advice on 'Choosing a Drama School' which bears repeating:

Do not be seduced by glossy prospectuses. You only need to know two basic facts: how many prizes and medals are handed out at the end of the final year . . . and how often are the study trips to the zoo (imitating animal behaviour is of course the most important skill for a young actor to acquire) . . . While the alumni of the Birmingham School of Speech Training and Dramatic Arts loyally defend the virtues of the aviary in the botanical gardens at Edgbaston, a better all-round bet is the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School – a goodly clutch of awards, and practically next door to Johnny Morris's old stamping ground [Bristol Zoo].<sup>23</sup>

If the reader is moved to hollow laughter at this point, perhaps they, or someone they know, attended one of the posher *conservatoires* in the 1980s. Animal work is a recognized (if freely adapted) approach to physical characterization, and it is true that many generations of budding thespians have been sent down to Regent's Park Zoo to observe the minutiae of a specific animal's movement and physical habits. Since the nearest zoo in Virginia was over two hours' drive away, actors in the *Dream* company had to use their imagination (and, I should add, numerous clips on YouTube) when choosing an animal as the basis for somatic characterization.

One advantage of incorporating animal work into rehearsal is that it generates large amounts of physical material very quickly. Refining this work to create more 'authentic' movement takes time, however, and the *Dream* company's rather ad hoc research methodology – observing animals in a virtual or notional way – presents its own distinct challenges to any notion of authenticity, making this work hard to evaluate in a systematic way. Laban effort actions share a somatic emphasis with animal work, and this suggested to me that Laban's notation system could potentially be

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<sup>23</sup> Nicholas Craig (with Christopher Douglas and Nigel Planer), *I, An Actor*, 2nd edn (London, 2001), pp. 132–4.

adapted to annotate the animal work brought in by the actors. To effect this, the actors were asked at an early stage of animal work to translate the essence of what they had discovered into one or more Laban effort actions. This meant that an actor who had chosen a smallish bird chose 'flicking' as the somatic default for this character, while another found 'pressing' best encapsulated the movements of a panther. Choosing a default mode of movement is very useful precisely because this allows for variation, and using the established Laban vocabulary allowed me to communicate effectively and actively with the actors, to find a range of minor and major variations on their default mode. Put simply, the Laban spectrum opposite of 'flicking' is 'pressing', and this is somehow a more credible proposition than suggesting the bird-character finds variety by adopting panther-esque movement every now and then.

SHAPE-SHIFTING ANIMAL  
WORK: OBERON

At the risk of contradicting the last sentence, I should add that Oberon's superior magical powers can be suggested through an imaginative actor's audacious facility with animal work, too. Henry Bazemore and I decided that to assign a different animal physicality and movement to each of Oberon's entrances in the plot against Titania might be a good way to ensure that the audience didn't get ahead of the physical storytelling, as well as making his line 'But who comes here? I am invisible' (2.1.186) a little easier to swallow. With a long black tunic that could suggest wings very easily, Oberon 'flew' in as a hawk, carrying the 'love in idleness' flower in his 'beak'. Anointing the sleeping Titania's eyes with the same affected a physical transformation into a larger predator, in this instance, a puma. Later on, as an altogether more jovial Oberon, Henry elected to listen to Puck's news of Titania's tryst with Bottom (3.2.6–34) with the screeching glee of an over-excited orang-utan, bouncing up and down as he did so.

In common with such 'big' choices in the area of animal work, Laban's effort actions are arguably most legible and/or audible to the audience when externalized and amplified by the actor, using their voices and bodies to explore the effort to its fullest extent. This tends to result in a physically expansive gestural language and playing style, but, like most genuinely useful systems, Laban's effort actions are flexible and fully adjustable to taste and style. An effort action can be fully physically realized, or cloaked, or internalized, to a point where the effort is only discernible by the audience in a subtle way. Internalizing an effort action, giving it a less expansive gestural scope, creates the impressions of an altogether different performance style. The cliché of the swan that masks its strenuous underwater paddling by appearing to glide on the water's surface is perhaps a useful model when considering the relationship between internal efforts and those which are externalized. The cloaking of physically expansive gestural language corresponds nicely to the process of making physical characteristics more 'natural' or, in the broadest sense, more 'human'. This cloaking process also suggests to the performer that naturalism is not an absence of style but a carefully orchestrated appearance of the natural.

In a nutshell, for this production, characters from Athens internalized their effort actions, while the fairies externalized their effort actions and chose to give physical actions their fullest scope. So, the approach to characterization for the mortal characters retained the same Laban vocabulary underpinning work on the fairy characters, while a distinctly more naturalistic, 'human' form was achieved by first decreasing the scope of the efforts or impulses being explored by the actors.

CHARACTERIZING THE  
MECHANICALS: SEND  
IN THE CLOWNS

To delineate the creative endeavours of the community theatre enthusiasts in Peter Quince's company from the behaviour of their social betters

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in the court of Theseus, the next step was to add in some of the gestural language of clown work, another readily legible, somatic approach to storytelling.<sup>24</sup> Taken as a whole, the mechanicals' narrative lends itself to self-consciously theatrical playing styles, even pastiche (there's a long and glorious tradition of laughing at the am-dram characters in this play) but, without a reasonably robust methodological framework, I feared that too much pressure might be felt by individual actors to invent gags, some of which might not support the overall narrative the company had agreed upon. So, I asked the company to consider these few 'ground rules' that have their roots in basic clowning principles.

### *Clown Rule 1: Everything is a Proposition*

First, in devising the performance style for the *Pyramus and Thisbe* show, all of the company involved in these scenes recognized the importance of accepting propositions and investigating them fully, rather than jettisoning new ideas without trying them out. This very basic rule – what Keith Johnstone calls accepting (not blocking) an offer<sup>25</sup> – is the foundation of all forms of improvisation. The explicitly democratic nature of this way of working was compromised, of course, by the pressure of time. Our expedited rehearsal period could not reasonably accommodate unlimited exploration of every proposition from each performer, and so a pragmatic 'if it ain't broke . . .' attitude among the cast played a key role in deciding which propositions were ultimately adopted as performance choices and which jettisoned. I would add that one huge benefit of 'Clown Rule 1' is that it avoids the potentially limiting imposition of a single performance style or concept, by effectively sidestepping the notion of a single authoritative presence in the rehearsal room.

### *Clown Rule 2: When you're on, you're on . . .*

It has been my experience that actors performing at the Bankside Globe and the Staunton Blackfriars very quickly become aware that 'when you're on, you're on'. The bare stage and universal lighting conditions combine to create a particularly exposed performance environment for the actor. This can

be no bad thing, as long as the performer exploits it successfully, and it starts with their entrance. The entrance is always part of the performance at the Globe and Blackfriars, never a mere transition into it.

Given that the flanking doors provide the location for most of the entrances and exits in any production, good clowns will give serious attention to these features of the Blackfriars' architecture. Obeying the conventions of popular farce also helped to delineate the mechanicals' own playing style. Actors were encouraged from the start to ensure that none of their entrances or exits were 'neutral'; in practice, this meant experimenting with extremes in tempo and duration of entrances and exits, as well as the comic potential contained in revelation or concealment of space or action, effected by doors which swing open or shut unexpectedly. Doors, we found, are a clown's best friend. Leaving both doors open allowed for a high-speed, figure-of-eight chase sequence between Puck, the mechanicals and the donkey-headed Bottom that borrowed equally from the comic stylings of Benny Hill and *Scooby Doo*.

### *Clown Rule 3: Everything is Potentially Animate*

Investing significance in certain props by animating them can pay theatrical dividends in the immediate and longer term. Put more simply, carefully setting up Bottom's choice of headgear for the rehearsal scenes in the forest – a helmet in Roman gladiator style in our case – will add a kind of comic poignancy to a later moment when Flute pays

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<sup>24</sup> Clowning is a very general term, and can refer to a wide range of performance traditions. Readers with an interest in the methodological roots of companies such as Theatre de Complicite and Théâtre de la Jeune Lune will enjoy Jacques Lecoq, *Theatre of Movement and Gesture*, ed. David Bradbury (London, 2006). A good general overview of clowns at work today can be found in Louise Peacock, *Serious Play: Modern Clown Performance* (Bristol, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Keith Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (London, 1981), p. 97.

tribute to his missing colleague, holding the same prop very much as though it were Yorick's skull. The difference between the helmet as prop and any old hat as a piece of costume is that the helmet is treated as potentially animate, and invested with significance accordingly.

There are many textual precedences for such investment in objects in Shakespeare's plays. The most obvious instance from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* surrounds the flower, love-in-idleness. The allusions in the speech in which Oberon tells the tale of Cupid's botched archery (2.1.155–74) may require glossing for some, but its chief *function* – to invest enormous significance in a small prop which is shortly to appear – is transparent to all.

*Clown Rule 4: Everything is exaggerated*

Dymphna Callery identifies traits common to all physical theatre styles as the 'paradigm of progressing from impulse to movement to action to gesture to sound to word'<sup>26</sup> which nicely traces the development of the mechanicals' devised approach to the *Pyramus and Thisbe* play within the play very succinctly. Laban effort actions can be exaggerated, as well as internalized. In creating the performance style for the *Pyramus and Thisbe* show, the mechanicals' amateur company used Laban efforts *in extremis*, to appropriately comic effect. Aaron Hochhalter's performance as Wall was characterized by 'pressing' throughout, in both somatic and vocal choices. This relentlessly strong, direct and sustained effort most literally encapsulated his role. For Wall's main speech (5.1.154–63) Hochhalter developed a technique of breathing which allowed him to give the impression of speaking all of his lines in one breath, at a regular pace, with no spaces between words. Hochhalter used pitch modulation to provide increasing levels of suspense (comically inappropriate for the purely expositional quality of the lines Wall actually speaks) by using a single monotone pitch for each weighty, sustained line, before raising the next verse line by a perfect half tone. The overall effect was almost too much to bear, for audience and performer alike.

PHYSICAL COMEDY AND STAGE  
COMBAT (LOVERS IN THE FOREST)

Of course, all somatic approaches to performance require actors who are physically fit, flexible and on occasion quite brave. As well as the transformations achieved by changes in Laban efforts, the lovers in particular had to undertake a lot of unreconstructed slapstick and knockabout comedy. We spent most of these actors' physical comedy capital in 3.2, the scene in which all four appear and a four-way squabble ensues. There is very little in the script which absolutely demands a full-on brawl between the four lovers, but the lengthy speeches contained therein present directors and actors with questions. Chief among these questions is, what, exactly, *are* the men doing during Helena's lengthy speech to Hermia on the theme of female friendship and double cherries (3.2.193–220)? While the Globe stage is sufficiently large for proxemics to do some of the work (and, despite their many detractors, those pillars arguably earn their keep as 'trees') the Blackfriars stage is tiny in comparison, and so this scene, unlike all the others, required at least some 'blocking', a term and a practice I dislike and usually avoid. Realistic fight choreography was very effectively employed for this scene, which provided a useful contrast to the 'magical' strength and prowess of fairy monarchs who could move entire gangs of mortals with the concentrated wave of a hand. We agreed as a company that the physical transactions between the mortal lovers could be very brutal, very literal, profoundly unimaginative. The anti-heroic altercations between Lysander and Demetrius owed a stylistic debt to Peter Brayham's hugely popular fight choreography for *Bridget Jones' Diary* (2001), and the set pieces needed to be orchestrated carefully, to time out perfectly and to avoid drawing all focus away from what was being said about double cherries and female friendship in another part of the forest, a few feet away.

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<sup>26</sup> Callery, *Through the Body*, p. 8.

## LETTER FROM THE CHALK FACE

### SUBTEXT AND INTERNALIZED EFFORTS IN THESEUS'S COURT

Audiences do not typically come away from performances of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* raving about the scenes which take place in Theseus's court. Traditionally there is little joy in the Athens of I.I., owing to the famous tradition of doubling Theseus/Oberon and Hippolyta/Titania. Once this casting decision has been taken, the opening scene necessarily settles itself in the gloomier end of its possible subtexts, often at the expense of the text itself.

My production contributed to this tradition, by characterizing Hippolyta as a less-than-thrilled wife-to-be, even though the text of her initial response to Theseus does not indicate any explicit unhappiness on her part. To communicate this unease is thus to engage with subtext and action, rather than rhetoric and narrative. Initially, I suspected these difficult scenes might be best played with a strong emphasis on clearly delineated objectives, clear choices of tactics, and an overriding concern to clarify relationships between the characters. Had we been allocated a further two weeks of rehearsal I would have encouraged the actors to tackle the Athens scenes using Stanislavski's system, thus rooting the scenes in an altogether different theatre tradition to the scenes in which the fairies take control. But as we had insufficient time to integrate Stanislavski's system formally into the rehearsal process,<sup>27</sup> Laban's effort actions once again proved an effective and highly adaptable methodology. Further adjustments to the scope of physical and vocal gestures meant that the same eight efforts could be deployed on a scale that audiences would read as psychological realism. The 'score' for Hippolyta's speech is provided below:

[PUNCH, internalised] Four days will quickly steep themselves in night,

[PRESS, internalised] Four nights will quickly dream away the time;

[GLIDE, internalised] And then the moon, like to a silver bow

New bent in heaven, shall behold the night  
Of our solemnities. (I.I.7-11)

Internalizing the efforts does not require any less physical engagement on the part of the performer, but the effect produced remains very much in the realm of realism. In this case, Lillian Wright's 'punchy' opening gambit almost interrupted Henry Bazemore's impatient observations about the passing of time. Having secured his attention, the sustained (but subtextual) weight of the 'pressed' second line ensured that Theseus could not mistake Hippolyta for a pushover. By choosing to lead the rest of this short speech with an internalized 'gliding' effort, Lillian created an effect that suggested a dignified but disengaged Hippolyta, one who suddenly and tragically realized that her fate was inevitable.

### SO, WHAT DID WE DISCOVER?

We discovered that the 'three worlds' of the play could be delineated by the somatic characterization of the actors. The fairies enjoyed a full range of vocal and physical scope, and their externalized efforts, coupled with animal work, produced a style of performance which richly suggested alien supernatural forces were at work. The mechanicals' style of clowning was achieved by cloaking the effort actions a little, and blending this with some tried and tested principles of clowning. Titania and Oberon's mortal counterparts sublimated their effort actions to produce the appearance of almost cinematic naturalism, without the complications of a Stanislavskian back story. The common Laban methodology provided the performers with many opportunities to suggest links between their variously doubled roles, and made transitions between different characters and scenes simple and

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<sup>27</sup> Another good reason not to switch the methodological focus of the rehearsal process (towards a formal consideration of Stanislavski's system) is that the overwhelming majority of actors trained in conservatoires on both sides of the Atlantic are exposed to some elements of Stanislavski's system as part of their basic training.

technical, and ‘mood proof’. We discovered that using three variations on a single methodological theme can refresh and make playable the literary-critical notion of the ‘three worlds’ of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, without recourse to elaborate or costly theatre technology, in keeping with the spirit of ‘original practices as research’. The play’s narrative depends as much upon difference as it does upon connections between roles, and adjustments to the same basic Laban frameworks effectively resulted in qualitatively different, but methodologically linked, playing styles. In purely practical terms, a shared technical vocabulary helped to produce an identifiable and *consistent* performance style for each ‘world’, without the need for lengthier rehearsal periods.

Ultimately, this production suggested the extent to which ‘character’ and ‘performance style’ are phenomena located in the eyes and ears of the audience, as well as the extent to which apparently radical shifts in performance style can be effected using relatively small adjustments to a single methodological approach. It is often the director’s job to judge the effects of the actors’ work on the likely perceptions of the audience, and it has been my experience that this job is made easier using an adaptable methodology, one rooted in actions that are easily executed, which uses simple language as the prompt for a range of beautifully complex variations which can be orchestrated ‘in the moment’. The common Laban vocabulary promotes an ensemble sense of ownership of the work, as well as a common structure based in activities, not repeatable forms. Activities are flexible, and may, as we found, be amplified, scaled down, internalized, externalized, endlessly modified and engaged with in a purely personal way, thus creating the impression of distinct playing styles for each ‘world’.

Placing value in the notion of an ensemble ‘ownership’ of the methodological means of production locates my approach firmly in the camp of moderns, of course, and marks a radical departure from most published strands of ‘original practices’ methodology, which historically and necessarily de-emphasizes the role of group work.

Weingust again engages with Worthen in this context, and identifies recognized theatre practices as inadequate:

While in traditionally prepared Shakespearean theatre today each company’s *production* of a play may be said to destabilise the text, in actuality the individual *performances* of that production tend to vary – and hence further destabilise the text – only little. Productions tend to replace the stability of a printed text with the stability of an aural and physically embodied text. . . . Particularly in long commercial runs, or by touring companies such as the RSC, once a production has been up and running, further destabilising of the written text, or any significant destabilising of the performance text, is generally quite minimal indeed.<sup>28</sup>

But I would argue that our shared performance vocabulary was not an attempt to impose a kind of false stability and authority in the performance text, but rather to provide a formal space in the rehearsal for a contract to emerge between all members of the company, that defined the parameters of the narrative they would undertake to tell, over the course of the tour. Using a common but adaptable methodology provided the freedom to play, as well as the structure to play well, together.

The myriad ways in which this touring production developed whilst on the road – too numerous, and perhaps too indulgent, to mention here – challenges any general assumption that a rehearsed production equates to a ‘sealed’ production. A more mature production returned to the Blackfriars in the spring, after almost eight months on the road, having apparently seized every opportunity to mature and refine itself in the area of audience engagement. This, perhaps, is the area most discussed in current scholarship on reconstructed early modern theatres and the companies who work in them, and it is also an area where a whole company’s experience will trump any individual director’s theory. For both of these reasons, I did not use rehearsal time to impose any hard and fast policy on ‘audience engagement’ methods and

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<sup>28</sup> Weingust, *Acting from Shakespeare’s First Folio*, p. 122.

## LETTER FROM THE CHALK FACE

strategies, electing to let the company develop and refine these on the road.

Finally, and most importantly, the common technical vocabulary provided the performers – some of them young and inexperienced – with no small degree of confidence. Weingust's argument for a production that honestly responds to its audience is in many respects a strong one,<sup>29</sup> but I would suggest that the production discussed here provides one model to achieve this, using, not jettisoning, modern actor training methodologies. I remain convinced that for all but the most

self-confident actor (itself a mostly oxymoronic concept, in my view) it is better to face an audience of strangers – and easier to play spontaneously and honestly with that audience – feeling that one is well prepared to do so.

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<sup>29</sup> The ASC's 'Actors' Renaissance Season' provides perhaps the best case study of this branch of original practices scholarship – that is, the theories of Stern and Tucker – in practice. As well as the chapter mentioned above, readers may wish to learn more about the Actors' Renaissance Season, from the ASC website: [www.americanshakespearecenter.com](http://www.americanshakespearecenter.com).