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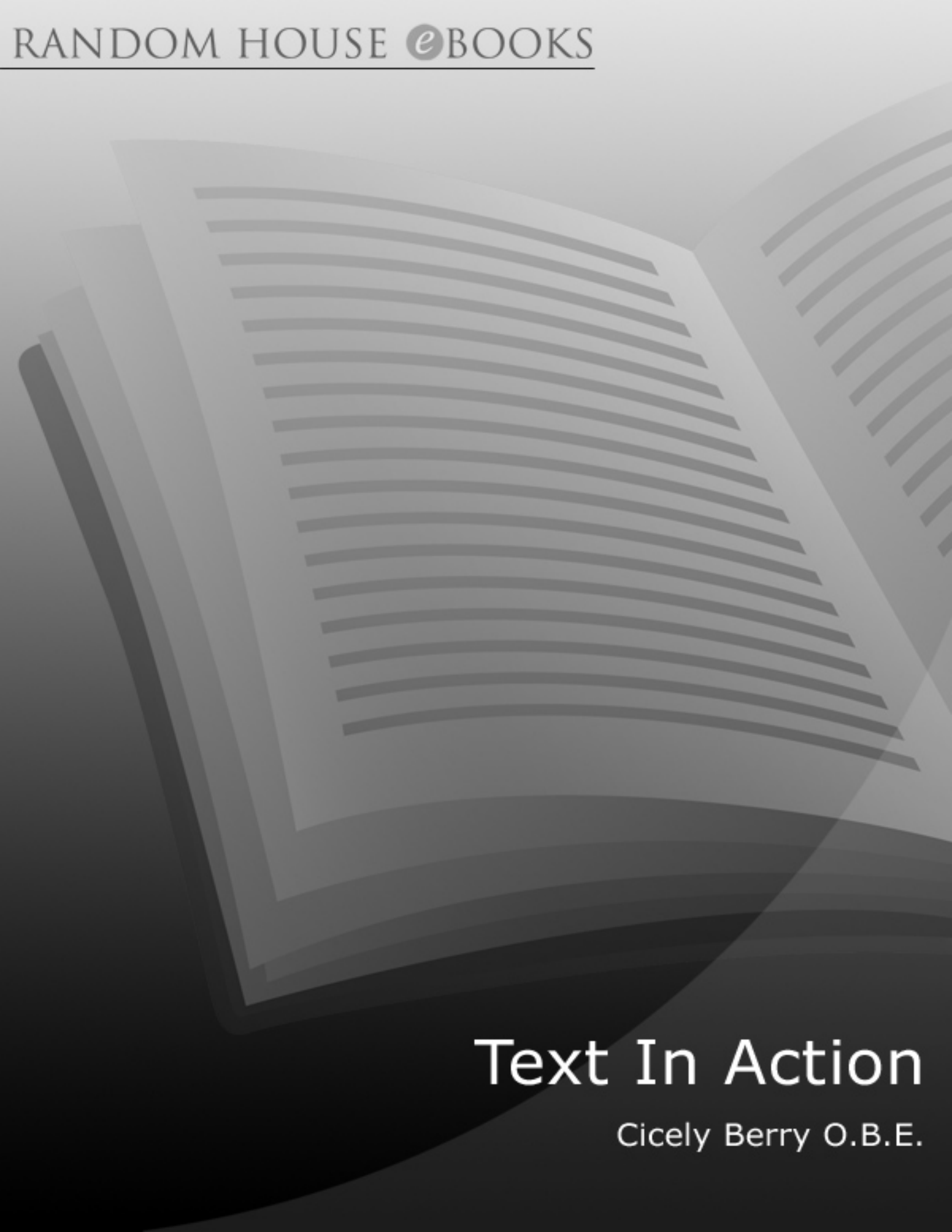

Text In Action

Cicely Berry O.B.E.

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About the Book

Cicely Berry, Voice Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, is world famous for her voice teaching. *Text in Action* contains the insights she gleaned from 50 years of working with actors and directors across the globe.

Following on from the widely acclaimed *The Actor and the Text*, Cicely Berry draws on her group work to emphasise how actors and directors can use the rehearsal process to heighten their collective awareness of language.

Our first acquaintance with a play is from reading it, either alone or as part of a group. During this process we concentrate on making sense of it, which can prevent us from listening to what the sound and texture of the language are telling us. The world of a play is created by its language; the imagery, rhythm and speech structures all contribute to its representation of reality.

Focusing primarily on Shakespeare, but with techniques that can be applied to modern texts too, Text in Action sets out language work that can be done by the whole group to uncover different layers of meaning within the text. It opens up new interpretations and possible reactions.

‘“*How we think is how we breathe” – Edward Bond said that to me one day – the spaces between thoughts, the very choice and sound of the words themselves: all these lead us to the person in the play and to the play itself. Voice work should not be something that is done at the last minute to make the play “clear” and the actor communicate “better*”.’

Also by Cicely Berry

Voice and the Actor
Your Voice and How to Use It
The Actor and the Text

TEXT IN ACTION

Cicely Berry
Foreword by Adrian Noble

Foreword

Cicely Berry will enter the rehearsal room quietly, frequently unnoticed, and sit listening, head slightly to one side, or follow the text thoughtfully. Her comments are invariably unpredictable, and can be quite discomfiting to the director and the actor. Why? She has an extraordinary knack of cutting the crap and focusing on the essential challenge of a scene, or a speech, or a characterisation. Her honesty, her intuitive understanding of actors and their processes, and a profound study of technique and methodology have made her one of the most influential figures not only at the RSC, where she has worked for the last 30 years, but in world theatre.

This is an important and invaluable book because in a brilliantly clear and practical way it addresses the central question of classical theatre: how to bring alive the world of the play through its language. This is much talked of and seldom properly addressed. She brings to bear on her subject the natural curiosity of the explorer and the patience in explanation of the good teacher. But more than anything else, she illuminates, as only an artist can.

Adrian Noble
Artistic Director, Royal Shakespeare Company

Introduction

There are four quotations/thoughts going round in my head which all seem to resonate with theatre now. First, a line from Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*:

> Where words prevaile not, violence prevails

We, the Royal Shakespeare Company, were working on this play in the Swan Theatre in Stratford, and every time I heard this particular line it came out and hit me. It seemed so truly relevant to now, the year 2000 AD, yet it was written around 1585.

For in this day of Internet technology, management jargon and minimal communication, our whole way of relating to one another is in the balance. Managements run courses on staff communication as if there were some kind of science to it, and I think in a sense we are controlled by the people who have the right jargon. But perhaps this has always been true to some degree, and it is simply that technology has taken over and bent the rules – an Internet hierarchy rather than a societal or political one.

But that jargon cannot express feelings or what goes on in the imagination for it is only concerned with the literal, and therefore I believe we have created a two-tier world where those who are computer-literate and speak the right jargon – or should I say, make the money – set the rules, and those who want to enquire imaginatively into the nature of being, and who often have a fuller understanding

of what is going on around them, become the underclass. There is a deep divide between those who can only see things literally, and those who have a deeper imaginative awareness and resource.

If we do not/cannot express our inner selves, how do we know what we think or what we feel? How can we have any philosophy or viewpoint? For it is in the expressing of our thoughts and intuitions that we can recognise them and deal with them – and take action. But if we cannot express these ideas and thoughts, the result can only be silent anger.

And here I want to digress for a moment to think about the written language. I am particularly interested in the area of dyslexia, and how this problem or this gift, whichever way you look at it, can also affect the way we express ourselves.[1] If you have dyslexia in any form it affects your ability to read and write, a proficiency on which your intelligence is judged, and you are deemed slow and unintelligent – all the things guaranteed to destroy your self-esteem. No matter that you have a different area of intelligence – a different mind's eye – you are profoundly affected and demoralised by the status quo judgement. How then can you express yourself with any authority? No wonder it is estimated that 52 per cent of offenders in prison are dyslexic, plus 80 per cent of drug addicts. Yet Einstein was dyslexic, as were Churchill and DaVinci, and in every NASA space station there is one dyslexic, specifically because they are regarded as having a different, and perhaps more encompassing, view of space.

But what I am also saying is this: when we read words they take us into a different area of awareness than when we speak them, for when we read our brains are being used to interpret what we read so that our imagination is not as free as when we are speaking them aloud. And this is why the actor, having learned the words off a printed

page, must be given time to explore them verbally, for they will reach the imagination in a different way.

But now to the business of the book. I want to explore the speaking of text in 2000, although I am aware that it will be out of date by 2010, for fashions/modes of speech are constantly changing and we have to continually redefine what is required of the actor. But because this book is about our awareness of, and response to, language, and how we adjust to both classical and contemporary writing, perhaps it will still have some value. I hope so.

Every play has a very specific world, and it conveys that world through the language: by this I mean not only through the meaning of the words but also in their sound, in the shaping and rhythm of the speeches, the images, and the spaces in that language. This is just as true in modern vernacular writing – the shaping of the language has to be found, or should I say heard, and that can sometimes prove more subtle than in heightened poetic writing.

But in Shakespeare, or indeed any highly poetic drama, the writing is much more extreme, and the modern actor must connect with the extravagance of the image yet make it sound as if spoken for now.

> Gallop apace you fiery-footed steeds,
> Towards Phoebus' lodging …

These are words with which we are all familiar – Juliet waiting for Romeo on her wedding night. The richness of the language in this speech tells us something of the extremity and heat of her love for Romeo, but we need to hear that heat and passion as if it is being spoken for now and not in some far-off, archaic time. The dynamic of that language has to be present in the actor at the moment of speaking.

And I suppose it is this very personal connection which the actor has to make with the language which has

continually interested me. For this connection goes far beyond the literal meaning: it is the meeting between the intention of the character and the imagination of the actor which is then released into the word – and this has many complexities.

The actor then has a difficult task: he/she must draw the listener in and energise the audience with the language, but not by making it 'beautiful'. We do not want the listener simply to appreciate it; we want him/her to recognise its necessity, its essence, and more than this, we want to awaken the desire to talk.

In the introduction to my book *The Actor and the Text*, I wrote the following:

> It seems to me there is so often a gap between the life that is going on imaginatively within the actor in order to create the reality of the character he/she is playing, and the life that he/she gives the text which is finally spoken. It is as if the energy and excitement that an actor feels when working on a part is not released fully when he/she commits to the words, when he/she is bound by the language set down.

The Actor and the Text was addressed directly to the actor, setting out the exercises which I have found to be particularly useful when working on text – modern as well as classical. But since I wrote that book I have developed the group work more and more, plus I have done a number of workshops with directors, including a very productive ongoing series in New York, refining the original exercises and exploring new ways by which this work can be an integral part of the rehearsal process.

And so here I want to take the work forward and look at it from the perspective of the director as well as the actor: to look at how voice and text work can be layered through the rehearsal period in order to have a truly creative input. 'How we think is how we breathe' – Edward Bond said that to me one day – the spaces between thoughts, the very choice and sound of the words themselves: all these lead us

to the person in the play, and to the play itself. Voice work should not be something that is done at the last minute to make the play ‘clear’ and the actor communicate ‘better’: it should be integral to the creative exploration of the play itself and of the character. The true exploration of the language should inform how we think, and how the character thinks.

My second quotation is from Heine Muller:

> Now is the time to turn the theatre into a space
> for the imagination.

Now a piece of theatre has to get at its truth, its centre, via an imaginative journey in an imaginative world: the director has to provide that world, and the actor has to make the journey happen. So, when working on a part, he/she is always having to move delicately between exploring the reality of the character and situation and making them clear, while at the same time being sensitive to the form and the sound of the language: for it is through this sound and form that the perception of the audience is engaged and made alert. The actor has to leave room for the audience to hear – to leave space for the imagination. This is a tricky balance.

My third quotation, and to me very important, is Rauschenberg:

> I am mistrustful of ideas –
> ideas are based on information you already know.

I think it is significant for this reason: as an actor you have, with the director, come to certain basic conclusions about the motive, the character, the story, in order to rehearse, and these surface out of one’s own experience and ideas. Yet at the same time you must leave yourself open to be surprised – surprised at the discovery of what the words do to you when you speak them, and how the act of speaking

them, how they sound in the air, may shift the meaning and alter your understanding of them. This can be very exciting.

My fourth quotation is from Edward Bond's poem 'On Leaving The Theatre' – the first two lines:

> Do not leave the theatre satisfied
> Do not be reconciled.

The role of the actor today is more important than ever: the more techno-speak takes over, the more we will disable our belief in language. Words have the power to disturb, surprise, delight and provoke, and they are happening in the moment – and between people. We must never forget this.

Two things about this book: I have called it *Text in Action* for it is about how we engage with the written text and make it active, and in so doing how our perception of the meaning can be changed. Secondly, it lays out the exercises, a number of which I have written about in *Voice and the Actor* and *The Actor and the Text*, and develops them in a way which is specifically focused on the rehearsal process itself. They are set out in a format which is designed to be used as an integral part of that process, and because that is essentially a collaborative one, I have written it with both director and actor in mind.

Just to keep everything in perspective, so that we do not get too solemn, I will complete the quotation from *The Spanish Tragedy*:

> Where words prevaile not, violence prevails,
> But gold doth more than either of them both.

Might this have some relevance to our present dilemma, our present society?

[1] An excellent book to read on this subject is *The Gift of Dyslexia* by Ronald D. Davis with Eldon M. Braun.

Part One
Language and Diversity

1 Hearing Language

Language resonates within us in deep and unexpected ways, and I believe that we cannot apprehend the full meaning of a text until we have voiced it aloud; voiced it with an understanding of its meaning, but without pre-empting either its emotional or its logical truth. This is not an easy thing to do. We have to be open to both its sound and its sense – we have to allow it to resonate within ourselves. I say this because I know there is something in all of us which responds to the sounds in language – whatever language it may be – as well as to its sense, and we must start by asking just how primal is that response.

'Who's there?' – the opening line of *Hamlet* and perhaps the most famous beginning of any English play, or indeed any play anywhere. Let us take a look at these lines:

BARNARDO Who's there?
FRANCISCO Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.
BARNARDO Long live the King!
FRANCISCO Barnardo?
BARNARDO He.
FRANCISCO You come most carefully upon your hour.
BARNARDO 'Tis now struck twelve. Get thee to bed, Francisco.
FRANCISCO For this relief much thanks. 'Tis bitter cold,
And I am sick at heart.
BARNARDO Have you had quiet guard?
FRANCISCO Not a mouse stirring.
BARNARDO Well, good night.
If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus,
The rivals of my watch, bid them make haste.

[*Enter Horatio and Marcellus*]

FRANCISCO I think I hear them. Stand ho! Who is there?
HORATIO Friends to this ground.
MARCELLUS And liegemen to the Dane.
FRANCISCO Give you good night.
MARCELLUS O, farewell, honest soldier
Who hath relieved you?
FRANCISCO Barnardo hath my place.
Give you good night. [*Exit*]
MARCELLUS Holla, Barnardo!
BARNARDO Say –
What, is Horatio there?
HORATIO A piece of him.
BARNARDO Welcome, Horatio. Welcome, good Marcellus.
MARCELLUS What, has this thing appeared again tonight?
BARNARDO I have seen nothing.

Hamlet, I.i.

Now obviously the initial question, 'Who's there?', is intriguing: to open with a question is a good rhetorical device, and our interest is kept by the spareness of the dialogue that follows. Now for the question: is this prose or verse? Some people will surely feel that it is a naturalistic opening, and therefore it is prose. But I believe it is written in verse, iambic pentameters; for if we speak those words out loud, observing the iambic metre, we will find that what arouses our interest are the spaces in the lines where no words are spoken. And it is those spaces that give us that sense of waiting and of suspense, and of words reaching across the dark, which take us immediately into the world of 'the other' – the mystery. And this is what resonates within us when we listen.

So let us look for a moment at the possibilities of that rhythm. If we take it that each line has five beats, consisting of one unstressed and one stressed syllable – 'te-tum, te-tum, te-tum, te-tum, te-tum' – you then become aware of the moments where there are no words – the silences.

BARNARDO	Who's there?	(4 silent beats)
FRANCISCO	Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.	
		(full 5-beat line)
BARNARDO	Long live the King!	
FRANCISCO	Barnardo?	
BARNARDO	He.	(this is one shared
		4-beat line, but there is
		a space somewhere)
FRANCISCO	You come most carefully upon your hour.	
		(full 5-beat line)
BARNARDO	'Tis now struck twelve. Get thee to bed, Francisco.	
		(full line)
FRANCISCO	For this relief much thanks. 'Tis bitter cold,	
		(full line)
	And I am sick at heart.	(2 silent beats)
BARNARDO	Have you had quiet guard?	
FRANCISCO		Not a mouse
		stirring.
		(shared 5-beat line)
BARNARDO	Well, good night.	(3 silent beats)
	If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus,	
	The rivals of my watch, bid them make haste.	
		(2 full lines)

I love the way the line 'Have you had quite guard?' hovers a moment before 'Not a mouse stirring'. You could say it poises. The lines that follow are regular five-beat lines, mostly shared. I have been rather didactic in that I have specified where the lines are shared etc., plus the number of silent beats, and I have done this simply to make us aware of an underlying dynamic in the rhythm which we have to hear first before we find the possible variations. As Peter Brook would say, there are a million ways to say one line, but we have to first find where the beat is because that is what gives it its electric energy and its suspense.

We will of course be looking in detail later at the whole issue of rhythm: how language and metre interact, and how the sense stress plays with the metre stress and syncopates with it. But just for now read the passage out loud to hear what is happening. Hear the possibilities.

Notice that language is demotic and ordinary, i.e. not poetic, yet it is defining what is unordinary in that

situation. It does this through the shaping of the dialogue, finding the spaces yet keeping the rhythm of the line as a whole, giving you that sense of waiting and disquiet. And a few lines later when Barnardo asks, 'What, is Horatio there?', and Horatio answers, 'A piece of him', it is seemingly ordinary, but we as listeners have to know it has been said – we have to be allowed to remark it. What does 'A piece of him' signify? Unease?

Our expectations have already been aroused so that when, a few lines later, Marcellus asks, 'What, has this thing appeared again tonight?', that first word suspends a moment in order for us to take in 'this thing' – the mystery. I wanted to start with this piece of text in order to open our ears to the possibility of suspense, of the silences which allow our imagination to work, and how these silences make us ready for what is to come.

Our imagination has been transported to that 'other' world: it does not have to be demonstrated by soldiers, military bustle and all that so often goes with this beginning. I heard Michael Billington put it exactly when he said 'visual reality is a decoy for the excitement of the argument'. What is being said here is exciting enough, for it challenges our idea of reality and of what 'the other' may be – and whether we believe. Bond says that there is a ghost in every play, and there is no doubt about this in *Hamlet*.

The point is there is something in the spareness of the language and the way it is spaced that intrigues and makes us want to listen. However ordinary, however demotic the dialogue is, it is there to define something: and this goes for contemporary writing in exactly the same way. It defines by its very form, and we have to be able to notice it, however thrown away or casual it may seem. It may not have a rhythmic beat, a metre, but it has its own very specific rhythm nevertheless.

We open the dialogue of this book with a question: how important is an awareness of rhythm for the actor today? How does it help us to find character and what does it tell us about the situation? I have purposely taken a piece which I believe is written in verse so that we can hear its spaces and its poises. But, as I have said, the rhythms of prose are just as defined and the spaces just as integral to the meaning, yet they are often more elusive and difficult to pin down.

So, the beginning of *Hamlet* is not poetic, i.e. heightened language, yet we respond to its emotional undercurrent, its hidden agenda. We could have taken a speech from *King Lear*, Act II, scene iv, where the emotion is overtly released into the sound and the language is most certainly heightened:

> O reason not the need! Our basest beggars
> Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
> Allow not nature more than nature needs –
> Man's life is cheap as beast's.

This is the premise – an enigmatic one because it makes us question the basic needs of life, and whether those basic needs are different for a king and for a beggar – but how those vowel sounds reach into his very soul. He goes on to argue this through with his daughters and ends with these words:

> You think I'll weep.
> No I'll not weep.
> I have full cause of weeping;
> [*Storm and tempest*]
> but this heart
> Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
> Or ere I'll weep. O Fool, I shall go mad!

Because the language is heightened, we hear Lear's desperate need for understanding and solace in the sound as well as the sense. And it is precisely through the

sustained rhythm and the length of those vowels that we apprehend something of the depth of his feeling. They resonate within us and we know that his heart is breaking. We are left with the question, where will he go?

We could of course have cited the most famous speech of all – 'To be, or not to be – that is the question.' Hamlet starts with this central question – the question for us all – and he argues this through in relation to his own dilemma, and comes to some sort of resolution – or non-resolution – which leaves us asking what will happen now. The ideas are interesting and of course crucial to the play, but they are made emotionally powerful by the way they are rhythmically spaced, how the thoughts get longer and gain momentum, so that the cadence of the speech works together with the argument on our subconscious ear – this is what gives it its emotional power.

The principle is the same for prose, as in the emotional power of the phrasing in the hostess's speech in *Henry V* when she is relating the death of Falstaff. The rhythm and spaces in the speech make it chilling.

So far we've considered Shakespeare, partly I suppose because his plays have always been central to my work in the Royal Shakespeare Company, but really because all the things one wants to say are palpable in his writing, for he was so in touch with the spoken word – its elegance, its roughness and its reality. He wrote the spoken word. However, what I am saying about the rhythm and shaping of language is as true for all dramatic texts – Kyd, Marlowe, Johnson – through Jacobean, Restoration to Shaw. The way the writing is shaped, the vocabulary used, the muscularity and sound of the language, all take us immediately into the world of the play: if the rhythms are jagged, with the thoughts knocking against each other, as it were, as in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, we know we are in a very harsh world – but then that can also be true of Bond and Barker and Rudkin. I think in many cases, particularly in

Jacobean writing, the rhythm is more difficult to get hold of than in Shakespeare because the thoughts are denser and more complex, but once you grasp how the thoughts and the rhythm interconnect, it becomes very clear. The shaping and sound of the language is the bedrock of the meaning – that is why it is so powerful. Or, in a very different way, in the writing of Shaw, it is in the rhythm that we find not only the wit, but the underlying passion of the argument.

But what I find really interesting is that all this is as true for modern writing: though the rhetoric is seldom apparent in the same way for it is 'today's speak', the form and the rhythms are just as crucial to the meaning and content. What it evokes in the listener can be just as extraordinary and surprising as in more obviously extravagant text. Look at the beginning of *Waiting for Godot*:

Estragon: Nothing to be done.

Vladimir: I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle.

So there you are again.

Estragon: Am I?

Vladimir: I'm glad to see you back. I thought you were gone for ever.

Estragon: Me too.

Vladimir: Together again at last!

Waiting for Godot, I.

Where are they? Our imagination is engaged immediately.

Because we live in a time which minimalises how we communicate our feelings, it does not mean that we feel with any less depth: it in fact makes the need to communicate our feelings much more desperate. 'Words are like the top of an earth-shift,' said Bond, and when we are working on contemporary plays we have to be aware of this. We have to be aware of the cry beneath the surface.

There is something therefore in the sound and the form of the language which holds our attention and which the actor has to find and then connect with the character. If the writing is naturalistic we have to hear that naturalism – yet it must be given room to define the situation. If the language is heightened and the imagery extravagant, the actor has to convey that extravagance yet sound in tune with the modern ear: we do not want 'museum-speak'. It must relate to now, which is not an easy task. For the actor is constantly walking a tightrope or, like the poet in Ferlinghetti's poem:[1]

Constantly risking absurdity
and death
whenever he performs
above the heads
of his audience
the poet like an acrobat
climbs on rime
to a high wire of his own making

So, what is it that we want to hear, and is there some kind of collective chord that can be tapped into? I think there are three issues here which we need to address:

(i) As individuals, director, actors or members of the audience, we each hear text differently according to background, culture, age, class, taste etc. If this is so, can there be such a thing as a collective voice: by that I mean a sound which appeals to all of us irrespective of our differences – a sound that strikes that chord – a sound which is appropriate and fulfils both the writing and the needs of the listener?

(ii) To what extent are we conditioned by what we are educated to believe is 'good' speech: by this I mean of course received pronunciation (RP) here in the UK, or 'Standard Speech' in the US, this being a kind of mid-Atlantic sound. And because both these have such

> class, money, education implications, how much does this limit our response to language and its possibilities?

Before we even try to find answers to these questions I want to recount three pieces of work in which I have been practically involved during the last ten years – all very different. They are equally relevant to both director and actor, but I will be considering them from the practical perspective of the actor first – I think it will make it clearer that way. And along the way I will also be citing examples from other languages and cultures, for it is interesting to know that actors everywhere have the same pressures to deal with.

The first piece of work is grounded in rhetoric, and how we can be aroused by the form of a speech almost independently of its meaning. There is a very interesting, and I believe important, book by Max Atkinson called *Our Masters' Voices*,[2] in which he lays out certain forms in the building of a speech which will provoke a favourable response. He claims most applause is caused by a small number of rhetorical tricks. He says the following: 'An ability to speak effectively is one of the oldest and most powerful weapons in the armoury of professional politicians.' And he cites examples of those in the present century who had this ability; among them Lenin, Churchill, Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Some mix.

He goes on to list certain 'clap-trapping' devices: opening with a provocative statement or question, building up in threes, contrasts, using a certain amount of alliteration and assonance, and ending with a question or a riddle. He then analyses a number of speeches from different politicians – Thatcher, Powell, Kinnock – and comments on their effectiveness: it is a fascinating book. But what is interesting for us to note is that the structures

he describes are all intrinsic to the way Shakespeare built the whole of his writing – not just the passages we all remember.

When *Our Masters' Voices* came out in 1984, Gus McDonald, who headed the programme *World in Action*, decided to make it the subject of a programme in order to test out the theories Atkinson had put forward. To do this they enlisted the help of Ann Brennan, who was about to address the Social Democrat Party conference in Buxton. She was a new candidate, the wife of a London taxi driver, and this was to be her first public speech, so she was naturally very nervous. The format to the programme was to be this: Ann Brennan would tell Max Atkinson what she wanted to say in her speech and he, aided by speech-maker Joe Haines, would then put it into a form of words which they believed would catch the ear. Then I would coach her in it, which I did on the stage of our main theatre in Stratford.

When it came to the day of the conference, Ann, with six other candidates, was given four minutes to speak. The other speakers got through their speeches quite normally and were each given a due round of applause: they all spoke well and had very relevant, thought-provoking things to say. When it came to Ann's turn, however, she was only able to get through about half her speech in the allotted time because of the applause she received. At the end she got a standing ovation. In all fairness, although what she said was interesting, I do not think it was the content of the speech that won that reaction, for all the speakers had had interesting things to say; I believe it was the form of words – the oratory, or rhetoric, that she had been given as a tool – which she had learned to use. This, I think, says a lot about how we listen – and how we can be unconsciously manipulated by the sound of language.

The actor does not want to manipulate people – that would not be truthful – but he/she must be able to strike

that chord in his/her audience and make them want to listen. For the writing itself has a shape and a sound which we must be sensitive to, and then hopefully pass on. Good writing resonates in both the speaker and the listener. I believe we all have the ability to hear it, but it has to be worked for.

Now to the other extreme – comedy. Is there also something common to the rhythm and cadence of speech which can provoke laughter? In 1998 I directed a production of *King Lear* at The Other Place in Stratford, to some critical success. My reason for wanting to direct perhaps the most profound and difficult of all Shakespeare's plays was to explore how to enter it through the language with the barest of visual setting.

During the period of the run I held a number of open workshops on the language of the play, always with members of the cast involved. One particular workshop focused on the scenes between Lear and the Fool. Maureen Beatty, who played Cordelia, was involved in the workshop and she brought her father, Johnny Beatty, a very famous stand-up comic in Scotland, along to the session. He had seen one of the performances of *Lear*, but very little other Shakespeare. However, when we started working on the comedy scenes in the workshop, Johnny was astonished by the realisation that the rhythms the Fool uses as he attempts to make Lear laugh were the same rhythms that he uses in his comedy routines in order to get his laughs from the audience, in fact, they were guaranteed to do so.

And I think this is both simple and profound, for so often in Shakespeare an audience laughs at the Clown/Fool without totally understanding the matter, because the jokes are so very much part of the period and therefore hard to figure out. Yet there is patently something in the rhythm to which we inevitably respond, and which makes us laugh – and what is more, this something in the rhythm has lasted over 400 years.

So, just how primal is this response? I think it is innate in all of us. Children love nursery rhymes. They love their anarchy and their rhythm and their rhyme – even more so when they go wrong! But the crucial thing that we must learn is this: the varying use of cadence and of rhythm has the power to stir feelings of sorrow, of anger and of laughter, and this is a powerful tool both for the writer and the actor. So often the actor feels under pressure to explain, describe, overstress the feeling, etc. (in other words, make it easy for the audience), but this obscures the rhythm of the language and in fact does just the opposite, for it makes it more difficult to understand.

The third piece of work I want to recount is centred round modern writing. In the last ten or so years I have held a number of workshops with writers, always with a group of actors involved. The work has focused primarily on the speaking of text, for in each of the sessions we have first worked on Shakespeare together, the writers joining with the actors, using exercises that I have evolved which are to do with finding the physical movement of the language, and how the thoughts move, plus different ways of connecting with the imagery. We addressed the following issues:

(i) How we listen to and hear language.
(ii) What we apprehend from its sound and imagery.
(iii) How much the speaking of the text changes our understanding of it.

We have then carried these questions through into modern writing, so that each writer worked with the actors on short scenes from their own texts, using the exercises which we had previously used with Shakespeare.

The exchange has always been extremely valuable and thrown up many questions. The writers have found it useful to hear their dialogue spoken aloud: it has given them time

to hear their rhythms and language without the pressure of rehearsal, and also to hear how the actual voicing of it may change their perception of its meaning. They have made adjustments if they felt it necessary. It also made them realise some of the complex feelings and inhibitions an actor has when faced with a script not seen before, and so clarified for them the actor's relation to a text.

From the actor's point of view I think two very valuable things have been learned – the first being that however modern the text may sound, however naturalistic, it still has a specific shape and music or cadence. It has an exactness which defines both the intention of the character and the world he/she is in, and if you go against that rhythm – clash with it, one might say – it does not fulfil the writer's intention. So often I think the actor feels under pressure to lay out the meaning and the emotion, explain it almost, and in so doing he/she loses the spaces, the rhythms, the music of the text – the means by which the writer chooses to reveal the play.

I think this last point is central to all acting: having discovered the emotional centre, the action and motive, sometimes you have to let the words go. If the speaker fills them too much with his/her intensity they become didactic, giving us the result of a feeling or motive, so that the words cease to be active and open to question. Words can be open and light and still make the desired impact.

But even more interesting for the actor, and also oddly reassuring, has been the realisation from these workshops that the writer so often gets a thought or an image from 'somewhere else' – either from somewhere in his/her subconscious, or from an image in the air, something seen outside which has awakened a train of thought, and which in some way defines the bottom line of an idea. So often there is not a defined, logical explanation to questions about the text: it is not 'worked out' logically but seems to come from a response to some deeper, 'other' impulse, and

it is only then that the mind starts to shape it and give it form. In other words, the image can be the power which unlocks the meaning or logic of the writer's subconscious intention.

I think what is important about all this is that it puts imagination at the centre of the actor's exploration. Yes, of course you have to make logical sense of a character's journey through the play, but it cannot be confined to that logic: an actor has to be free to respond to that 'other' within him/herself and that is what will make the result unique and interesting.

The pieces we looked at were seemingly unconnected pieces of work, each one looking at language from a different perspective, yet each tells us something about how language both impinges on the hearer, and evokes a response in the speaker:

(i) How a political speech can arouse us, arouse our feelings of anger, sorrow etc., not just by the cogency of its argument, but by its very rhythm and use of rhetoric.
(ii) How the juxtaposition of varying lengths of phrases, plus an awareness of suspense, can provoke laughter and/or tears.
(iii) How the very shaping of dialogue can influence, and even change, the meaning as we speak it.

We see that it is through the speaker's sensitivity to the spaces and rhythms in the writing, to its muscularity and varying syllable lengths, and to the way the cadence of a speech can lift the meaning through, that the listener will understand not only its logical surface 'sense', but will also apprehend the underlying spirit/motive of the word – the hidden agenda, if you like.

And here I want to digress a moment, for I believe this awareness is present in all languages – though with very

different forms and sounds. I have worked in Hindi and other Indian languages, in Mandarin, and in most Europoean languages – particularly Portuguese, having been to Brazil a number of times. My work has mostly, though not totally, focused on Shakespeare: this means that I am familiar with the content of what is being spoken so that once I am in tune with the sound of a particular language I am able to recognise and apprehend so much through the changes in rhythm and cadence. I hear where the actor is in the text, and what he/she is trying to do with it. I can work in these languages in the same way as I work with English text: i.e. getting the actors to feel the muscularity of the language, finding the movement of thought, plus the changes of cadence between the lyrical passages and the demotic. The exercises work in all languages, though of course just how far you can go depends to an extent on the quality of the translation. Work on contemporary plays is of course very different, but it is also very interesting to find just how much one can apprehend about the whole, the meaning, just by listening.

I particularly remember a workshop I did with actors in Beijing. We were looking at Act I scene i of *King Lear* and finding how the characters related to each other through the language. In this scene Lear asks each of his daughters how much they love him, to which both Goneril and Regan reply effusively, though with obvious underlying hypocrisy, and they are awarded land accordingly. Lear then turns to his favourite daughter, Cordelia:

LEAR – Now, our joy,
Although our last and least …
… what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters'? Speak!
CORDELIA Nothing, my lord.
LEAR Nothing?
CORDELIA Nothing.

LEAR Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.

King Lear, I.i.

Now Mandarin is a tonal language, altering meaning by means of changing tones, as well as by speech sounds, and its sound is so totally different from English, yet I will always remember how that one word, ‘nothing’, rang out in Mandarin. The sound of that word became so powerful not by stressing it or being loud, simply because the actor had found its right space. That space was particularly telling because it pointed up the antithesis between the word ‘nothing’ and the heightened extravagance of the protestations of love that Goneril and Regan had made in order to get what they wanted. I think every actor knows when that link is made between sound and sense – when the word and the motive come together, giving that sense of authority, of being with the word.

That was a digression, but I think an important one, for I do believe that there is something in a good piece of text in whatever language – in its form, in its sound – which the actor needs to tap into as part of the process by which he/she enters a character. We have to ‘hear’ that language to find where it takes us, and we have to let it resonate within us.

So what gets in the way? I think so often it is the need to present, the need to be ‘ready’, to be interesting, which puts pressure on the actor and as a result something of the mystery in the language gets lost. I do not mean anything esoteric by that, for the actors have to make clear the motives and reasons behind the text, but once these are found then we must let the words have their own energy. There is a fine line to be drawn between presenting an idea as a result, and/or allowing that idea to be discovered, for while we are speaking we are still open to change, and we want the listener to be open to it as well. For me, in