

## The Kindest Cut of All: Editing Shakespeare's Scripts for Performance

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"So you're the guy who cut my favorite line in *Macbeth*?"

"Where was Old Gobbo? He's the best character in the show."

"I paid my \$58; I want to see the whole play! Are you going to cut the price of my ticket like you cut the script?"

During my twenty-five-year career as company dramaturg at the Utah Shakespeare Festival, I've heard a number of similar comments about my role in editing scripts for performance (though this is only a small part of my job description). Few of these aggrieved patrons are placated by the suggestion that the many variant early quarto and folio editions of Shakespeare's plays hint tantalizingly that the author edited his own scripts for productions at different times and in different venues. Nor are they persuaded that the Prologue's reference in *Romeo and Juliet* (a play that runs nearly four hours in a contemporary uncut production) to "the two hours' traffic of our stage" is anything less than dramatic hyperbole. "Everyone knows," they argue, "that Elizabethan actors spoke much faster than modern ones do." Risking fanny fatigue à la *Nicholas Nickleby*, they want the whole play and nothing but the play, even if Gertrude drinks her poison considerably after the midnight chimes.

One of life's great ironies is that I am entirely sympathetic to these arguments. To paraphrase Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice*, I hope audiences will "Mislike me not for my profession." As befits someone who started out as an English professor and then segued into the world of professional theatre, I cherish every

word in the plays. In fact, theatergoers should be deliriously happy that someone like me is helping to cut the scripts because every word or phrase I delete is like ripping out a small piece of my own still-beating heart. I learned early in my theatrical apprenticeship, however, that the languid pace of reading Shakespeare's scripts in the comfort of one's own study or teaching the "whole play" to a group of undergraduate students must of necessity give way to the *real politik* of the theatrical profession, in which many different factors dictate the permissible length of a Shakespearean production. Since almost all theatres cut almost all their Shakespeare plays, the question is not whether to slice and dice, but how to make the best textual recipe possible while performing this necessary task. Consequently, I'd like to list the "top ten" determining factors here in hopes of illuminating the exceptionally complex and often angst-ridden process of editing Shakespeare's plays for production.

1. *Abiding by Time Restrictions*: First (no surprise here), the length of our productions at Utah is initially dictated by our desire to keep the plays between two and a half to three hours' running time (including one fifteen-minute intermission), which we have long felt is a comfortable duration for audience members to remain in their seats. Figuring 1,000 lines of script per hour of stage time (or 3 ½ seconds per line), this means that a play like *Hamlet*, sporting nearly 3,780 lines, must be cut by some 1,000 lines to fit into our procrustean theatrical bed. In fact, R. Scott Phillips (our executive director) and Brian Vaughn and David Ivers (our wonderful new artistic directors) start fidgeting if the shows run more than two and three-quarter hours. As a result, we have a mandate from our producers that the curtain must come down metaphorically by 11 p.m., given a starting time of 8 in the evening. Though this is relatively easy with shorter scripts like *The Comedy of Errors* or *The Tempest*, it can be extremely difficult with a play like *King Lear* or *Othello*, where audience members know the plays so well that they often mouth the words along with our actors. Several years ago, in fact, during the Prince's crucial 3.1 soliloquy in *Hamlet* at the USF, the actor playing the title role followed the words "To be" with a long theatrical pause, during which a patron in the front row helpfully added "or not to be" in a rather loud stage whisper, which prompted audience laughter rather than dramatic

empathy. Additional factors like stage fights, music, songs, or scenic transitions often complicate the 1,000 lines/hour formula, though we've found that the estimate is useful in helping us make rough initial cuts.

2. *Facilitating the Director's Concept*. In addition, any such editorial changes will often reflect the director's attempt to shape the script to fit his or her vision of the production, which will usually blossom through weeding, pruning, and other horticultural adjustments to the verbal garden of the play. Most of the cuts will be forged through a dialogue between the director, dramaturg, and actors. Sometimes the director sends potential cuts to me first and I respond, and sometimes the process works in reverse. It's always a sustained and spirited "conversation" at our theatre, however, which ends in a viable script intended for performance by specific actors for a known audience. I dramaturged, for example, a wonderful version of *The Winter's Tale* at Ashland in 1990, in which director Libby Appel envisioned Paulina, played by Mimi Carr, as a "shaman" figure whose magical control over the world of the play culminated in the brilliant statue scene at the conclusion of the production. Had we not cut some lines and rearranged several of the speeches to highlight Paulina's central role in the show, I doubt the play would have worked so well. The three weeks we spent sending emendations back and forth through the mail paid handsome dividends in the eventual production of the play. The same has been true for several versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* I've dramaturged (including Fred Adams's excellent 2011 production), in which the directors wanted to double the roles of Theseus-Oberon, Hippolyta-Titania, and Philostrate-Puck, which always necessitates some textual gymnastics. Sometimes the "shaping" is more controversial, as it was in a production of *The Merchant of Venice* I worked on at another theatre where the director cut Shylock's "fawning publican" speech (1.3.37-48) entirely to make the character appear more sympathetic to the audience, or more recently in Henry Woronicz's lovely production of *The Taming of the Shrew* at Utah in 2004, where the lines in the famous 5.2 "submission speech" were alternately shared by Kate and Petruchio, thereby crafting a conclusion more amenable to modern sensibilities. Most of the theatres at which I've worked have permitted some cutting and rearranging of lines if the textual

editing served the overall design of the production without unduly compromising the integrity of the script under consideration. It's always a judgment call, however.

3. *Deleting Obscure References*: Since only the most devoted antiquarians can blissfully sit through uncut catalogues of arcane references and historical trivia in such difficult plays as *Troilus and Cressida*, *Love's Labor's Lost*, *Henry VIII*, and others, most theatres will trim or somehow clarify obscure lines in the interest of maintaining audience attention. At a certain point, directors inevitably ask themselves if the gestural histrionics required to clarify an incomprehensible sixteenth-century joke are worth the stage time required to do so. The whole "sheepship" business between Proteus and Speed in 1.1.71-101 of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* is a good example of dialogue that may have been knee-slappingly funny in 1594, but modern actors have to use enough hand signals to land a 747 in order to get the idea across. The same theory applies to deleting references that might make some theatergoers uncomfortable. In Flute's allusion to "eke most lovely Jew" in 3.1.90 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, the word "Jew" is undoubtedly a nonsensical repetition of the first syllable of "juvenal" earlier in the line, but you'd need a dramaturg in the wings shouting clarification to the audience in order to illuminate that subtle etymological point. Since it appears to be a gratuitous ethnic non-sequitor, most productions of the script cut or emend the line to sidestep confusion and avoid offending patrons. Admittedly, some directors like to focus on the more unintelligible moments in a script. For example, as the innovative modern director Peter Sellars once explained in a *Time Magazine* interview, "When I direct Shakespeare, the first thing I do is go to the text for cuts. I go through to find the passages that are real heavy, that really are not needed, places where language has become obscure, the places where there is a bizarre detour. And then I take those moments, those elements, and I make them the centerpiece, the core of the production" ([31 October 1994], 78). The rest of us, however, do just the opposite when we delete arcane, incomprehensible, or potentially offensive lines from a script, thereby streamlining and clarifying the play for its audiences.

4. *Omitting Disputed Lines*: The same is true of variant readings in the early quarto and folio editions of the plays, in which the

suspected lack of authorial authenticity often dooms a line or phrase to the cutting room floor. Is Hamlet's flesh too too "solid," "sallied," or "sullied"? It depends on whether you're relying on the Folio, the Quarto, or a nineteenth-century conjectural emendation by Horace Howard Furness. Which early edition of *Othello* is closer to Shakespeare's original manuscript: the 1621 First Quarto or the 1623 First Folio? And what do we do with the 160 lines that appear in the Folio, but not in the Quarto edition? Should we include them in an acting edition? How about a play like *Timon of Athens*, the Folio text of which seems to have been based on an early unedited draft of the author's foul papers? To what extent do we spruce up Shakespeare's scripts if he obviously didn't have the time or energy to do so himself? Such questions soon get us enmeshed in discussions of early printing house practices, compositors' routines, Stationers' Register records, Elizabethan "secretary hand," joint authorship, and other bibliographical quibbles usually reserved for doctoral classes in the study of Shakespeare. Yet some knowledge of these complexities is necessary for anyone foolhardy enough to perform verbal surgery on Shakespeare's scripts.

5. *Consolidating Roles*: Whether Old Gobbo actually appears in a production of *The Merchant of Venice* depends on many factors, including whether the script wants additional cuts to conform to a pre-ordained running time, whether the director needs more or less comic relief in the show, and/or whether you've got a dynamite actor playing the part. Some or all of such roles will undoubtedly be cut unless the production has the luxury of including all the dialogue from its so-called "minor" characters. Often, it's the clowns who bite most of the dust, occasionally including, for example, some of Lavatch's more opaque lines in *All's Well That Ends Well*, a smattering of the Fool's dialogue in *King Lear*, Sly in the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew*, and much of the Froth/Elbow business in *Measure for Measure*. Sometimes, several smaller parts are consolidated to save time, making one substantial role for an actor out of several lesser ones. How many "Gentlemen" do we really need in *Lear*? And how many "Citizens" are required to swell the crowd in *Coriolanus* or *Timon of Athens*? Such deletions, conflation, and doubling can serve both temporal and economic ends. Combining several characters into one will often save

time through script cuts, unnecessary costume changes, and a streamlined rehearsal schedule, while the tactic can also help the festival conserve precious financial resources by eliminating the need for additional salaried actors to play the discarded extra roles. Most of the directors I've worked with over the years, however, prefer internal cuts to deleting entire characters or scenes, which makes the editing appear more seamless and doesn't deprive actors of potential roles.

6. *Sending Cuts Out Early*: At the USF and most other regional theatres, scripts are mailed or e-mailed to the actors well before the beginning of rehearsals. The first and most obvious reason for this is to allow the acting company more time to learn their lines in preparation for the rehearsal process. A second, equally important motive is to maintain actor confidence. There's nothing worse than playing the Second Gentleman, going through the first read-through with your entire role intact, and then discovering at the second rehearsal that your part has been gutted of more than half its lines. Since most actors would interpret this as a lack of confidence in their ability to perform the part, we try hard to get the cuts to the actors as early as possible. That way, they take the deletions less personally, seeing them instead in the larger context of the director's approach to the show, mandated time constraints, budgetary realities, and other theatrical considerations that have little to do with their own innate skills. All theatres make additional cuts during the rehearsal process, of course, though these will generally reflect anxieties about running time, jokes that continue to fall flat (no matter how often they are re-tuned), last-minute personnel adjustments, crucial stage business, costume changes, fight and dance choreography, and other essentials endemic to the living, breathing, evolving process of theatre.

7. *Exploiting Actor Strengths*: The number of lines cut from an actor's role will usually, of course, betray the respect theatres have for the artist in question, who can often be extremely well known (and therefore a strong box office draw), a long-time audience favorite at the festival, immensely talented, or all of the above. Hal Gould (*Rhoda*, *Golden Girls*, *The Sting*, *Love and Death*) played King Lear for us at the USF in 1992 and Prospero in 1995, and I don't believe we cut a single line of his in either show. The same is true when you've got Brian Vaughn playing Hamlet,

Leslie Brott and Michael Connolly acting Kate and Petruchio, Jamie Newcomb as Coriolanus, Elijah Alexander as Richard III, or any other well-known and gifted performer in a major role. You want your featured stars to shine as brightly as possible. The corollary is seldom true, however. Just because a theatre has lesser-known actors in smaller roles, their lines are not necessarily more vulnerable to excision because of the actors' relative pecking order in the company. The smaller roles may be in jeopardy due to their diminished importance in the script, but not because of the gifted performers who play them.

8. *Trading Lines*: Some cuts operate on the barter system. A common occurrence during the rehearsal process is for an actor to approach the director and intone some variant of the following familiar plea: "I've been looking over the cuts in my part, and I really need to have back these six lines in order to fully flesh out my character. The role just doesn't make sense without these lines." To this request, directors will invariably say, "Sure, I'd be glad to give those lines back to you. But in order to keep the running time where we need it to be, which six lines will you give me in return?" Such sobering discussions will often encourage an actor to rethink his or her dramatic priorities while still respecting the theatre's right to bring in the production under its mandated time limit. Ideally, each actor would be able to say all the lines assigned to his character in the acting edition chosen for the production. But is this always a desirable or prudent rule to follow? I've personally had some wonderful experiences working with the entire uncut script in Shakespearean productions. For example, Des McAnuff's modernized production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the La Jolla Playhouse in 1983 featuring John Vickery and Amanda Plummer used the entire Folio edition of the play, including the dialogue between the musicians at the end of 4.5, which is omitted in most productions. Although the performance was four hours long, it was breathtakingly exciting. As I watched the musicians sit on the bed of the (supposedly) dead Juliet, I realized with great clarity why that episode is in the script: It provides a fictitious mourning scene to prepare the audience for the much more poignant actual death of the heroine three scenes later in 5.3. Sadly, however, most full-text productions of Shakespeare please the scholar more than the average theatregoer, substituting a languorous museum piece

for a fast-moving, vibrant, well-edited production.

9. *Cutting or Emending Famous Speeches*: Another important variable in determining which lines or speeches are subject to the ax is, of course, how familiar the play in question is. From the sublime to the ridiculous, we would certainly never edit out Hamlet's famous "How all occasions do inform against me / And spur my dull revenge" speech, or Macbeth's "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" soliloquy, or any other well-known, favorite lines. What would a Rolling Stones concert be without "Sympathy for the Devil"? If Caesar doesn't say "Et tu, Brute," we'd all demand our money back. But what about some of the more obscure lines from *Henry VIII*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, or *King John*? Will anyone ever miss them? That's a question devoutly to be asked. This may be an odd way to run a railroad, but I suspect most directors and dramaturgs would agree that the more obscure a line or speech, the more vulnerable it is to excision. When you're scanning for lines to cut so you can abbreviate the play's running time, you look frantically for repetition, non-sequiturs, archaic or obsolete words and phrases, jokes that don't work, ornamental rhetorical flourishes, and, yes, lines that most people won't miss when they're gone. You need to keep the storyline intact, of course. That's Job One. But when the production opens in a week and you still have to prune fifteen minutes from the show, a surprising number of options will miraculously appear. No one likes these last-minute cuts—least of all the actors who now have to delete from their memory banks lines and blocking they have painstakingly conned. This is another reason why we try hard to have almost all the cuts in place prior to the first rehearsal at Utah. Sometimes, however, we need last-minute textual emendations to shave more time off the production. That's when obscurity is our very best friend.

10. Concluding our brief summary of how we cut Shakespeare's scripts for performance, I'd like to mention a few variables we don't have to deal with at the Utah Festival, although other theaters routinely cope with such problems. The first has to do with the resources of the theatre. We're very fortunate to have two superb principal performance spaces. Our outdoor Adams Theatre, built in 1977, is a beautiful 819-seat open-air venue with a thrust stage, a balcony and an inner below, ramps at stage left and right, a large trap, and a very serviceable slip stage. Patterned after early

drawings of sixteenth-century stages, it is considered so authentic in design that the BBC filmed a monumental documentary series there several years ago and compared it favorably to Shakespeare's own Globe Theatre. Our 1989 indoor Randall Theatre is a state-of-the-art 769-seat facility with a proscenium stage that can easily be equipped with a balcony and an inner-below if the script and the director's approach call for such accoutrements. In short, we're blessed with excellent venues in which to present Shakespeare's plays, as are many other wonderful theatres like the ones in Ashland; Stratford, Ontario; and the newly rebuilt Globe on the South Bank of the Thames. Occasionally, however, theatres without such traditional architectural resources may have to cut, edit, or otherwise reconfigure the language of the plays to accommodate the design of the theatre. If you don't have an inner above, for instance, you'll have to find imaginative ways to do the balcony scenes in *Romeo and Juliet*, the scaling of the fortress walls at Harfleur in *Henry V*, Arthur's leap to his death in *King John*, and the famous tomb scene in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Without an inner below, presenting the world of the tavern in *I Henry IV* and many other scenes that require pre-set furniture and props hidden behind a curtain on a slip stage is challenging indeed. Lacking a trap, you'll have to find a different way to do the dungeon episodes in *Measure for Measure* and elsewhere, the Witches' cauldron in *Macbeth*, the parade of the Seven Deadly Sins in *Doctor Faustus*, and many other crucial scenes. In addition, the cutting and rearranging of scenes is often required for small-cast productions of Shakespeare's plays (*Julius Caesar* presented by six actors, for example), which we have seldom done at Utah. Whatever the challenges, however, creative directors, designers, and actors will always find a way to perform the plays, even if they have to edit Shakespeare's language to make it happen!

To cut or not to cut, that is the question. And the answer, as the foregoing examples suggest, is often, "Yes"—if we want to shape the plays to the tastes of contemporary audiences, newly designed theatres, and festival financial resources. Does Shakespeare suffer in the process? Perhaps. But the textual sacrifices we make in bringing the scripts to life over four centuries after the author's death are more than compensated for by the millions of appreciative theatregoers who applaud brilliant productions of

his plays throughout the globe each year. If we're going to edit the scripts, we need to do it with all the compassion, sensitivity, reverence, and respect necessary to keep Shakespeare's artistic vision fresh and vibrant for our modern world. As Cassius metatheatrically asks of the conspirators in *Julius Caesar*, "How many ages hence / Shall this our lofty scene be acted over / In states unborn and accents yet unknown" (3.1.112-114). I doubt that Shakespeare had Cedar City, Utah, in mind when he wrote these lines, but their prophetic fury invites each of us to develop new and inventive ways to render his plays completely accessible for today's audiences. When a little editing is required to make that happen, we always look for "the kindest cut of all."

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