

Reading Rehearsal Toward a Theory of Shakespeare “Activity”

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Any paper looks at two Shakespeare productions that serve as heightened instances of one of the most basic conditions of creating theater: the entanglement of text with other vocabularies and circumstances of performance, from gesture to lighting to the body of the actor. Declan Donnellan’s statements in the *The Actor and the Target*, his widely assigned acting textbook, that the text is “a *tool* to change what the target is already doing” (italics mine)¹ or, more suggestively, that “words don’t work”² and must be put rigorously to work, likely strikes practitioners of theater, including many of us in the Shakespearean Performance Research Group, as obvious. The idea that the text gets subordinated to a larger performance project in ways that differ from production to production is not necessarily reflected, however, in mainstream and academic Shakespearean performance criticism, which tends to proceed—as one of our co-conveners, W. B. Worthen, frequently points out—as if the text, in large part because of its entrenched status as literature, provides a blueprint or template for performance.³ But then again, observes Michael Dobson, “Writing about Shakespeare in the theater while mentioning Shakespeare as little as possible” would seem to “demand contortions of language and expression that might tax even the most ingenious of performance critics.”⁴ Are we indeed at “something of a stand-off” in Shakespeare studies, as Margaret Jane Kidnie suggests, between two modes of conceiving of performance, one that mines it for what it says about Shakespeare and the other for what it says as performance, about performance?⁵

I propose to enter the dialogue from a new perspective, that of contemporary Shakespeare rehearsal, of directorial approach and the mundane stuff of script formatting, blocking, and acting exercises. My case studies are Andrei Serban and Karin Coonrod's productions of *Love's Labour's Lost*, performed, respectively, at Riverside Church at Columbia University in 2010 as part of the university's graduate acting program and at the Public Theater in 2011.⁶ Serban and Coonrod both have long careers in "reinventing" classic work, whether through significant textual adaptation or the incorporation of highly stylized movement and visual imagery. *Love's Labour's Lost* appealed to both of their aesthetics as a play that constantly calls attention to its own form and obsesses over the delights and failures of language. It tracks no less than four pairs of lovers, only to snatch away, famously, the expected consummation of their flirtation.

"In perhaps no other play," says James Calderwood, "does language so nearly become an autonomous symbolic system where value lies less in its relevance to reality than in its intrinsic fashion."⁷ Serban and Coonrod tend to treat language—the words on the page—as one among many available signifiers of a blatantly *artificial* reality. Their practices for this play, then, provide richly heightened examples of what takes place in rehearsal rooms around the country: that is, what we might call, borrowing a phrase that Oskar Eustis, the Public Theater's artistic director, used to describe its 2011-2012 season, "Shakespeare activity." Shakespearean activity entails a messy, mutually informative, dynamic relationship between text and performance that inevitably gets transferred to the stage. By providing "backstage" insight into these productions, I hope to demonstrate, in a new way, the need for criticism more responsive to the dynamics of how performance actually gets made.

Love's Labour's Lost at Columbia

Andrew James Hartley, a scholar, director, and author of *The Shakespearean Dramaturg: A Theoretical and Practical Guide to the Role of the Scholar in the Theatre*, advises an admittedly "middle ground" approach to script preparation for Shakespeare production. By the first "read-through," he instructs, the "script should look finished, even if some details are still under discussion."⁸ His

proscriptive method, and those of two other practical guides to producing Shakespeare, Sidney Homan's *A Scholar Onstage*⁹ and Michael Flachman's more recent *Shakespeare in Performance: Inside the Creative Process*,¹⁰ not only conflict with the ever-evolving nature of the performance script in Serban's *Love's Labour's Lost*, but also with the responsiveness of textual editing to rehearsal processes in theater practice more generally. With Columbia's 2011 graduate acting class, the script changed every single day and never in the same way. "I learn the play as I am doing it," Serban has said.¹¹

Many of the script decisions made prior to rehearsal were abandoned when Serban got in the room with the actors, for those decisions—as Hartley et al. advise—had been guided by a *general* notion of "performance playability" with a 90-minute, intermission-less evening in mind. The actors had received that script a month before rehearsals, in the form of a Word document with cut lines "struck through" and certain lines redistributed more evenly to balance parts. This method of formatting, with black lines still legibly revealing the text underneath, at once signals the script's mutability (its potential to change) and creates the illusion of an original, full, "real" version lurking underneath those lines. Here, it meant that Serban—who approached the play's tricky "linguistic doodling" by asking of every scene, line, and word, "How do we make people understand this?"—could easily emend the text as a solution, cutting lines, restoring lines previously cut, rearranging and reassigning lines, rearranging scenes, and creating new lines.¹² When the assistant director commented in a read-through that Holofernes's final line, "This is not generous, not gentle, not humble" (5.2.617), functions similarly to Malvolio's infamous last words in *Twelfth Night*, "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!" (5.1.365), Serban directed the actor to make Malvolio's line her last (in this production, a woman, Holoferna).¹³ Over the course of rehearsals, the actors' scripts accumulated enough scribbling—arrows, notes, x's, highlighting, erasure dust—to render them recognizable only to the individual owner. Contaminated by the marks of performance and then abandoned for performance, the script's evolution reflects its gradual appropriation by the theatrical event.

It is somewhat misleading, however, to separate a discussion of the development of the script from the movement vocabulary that

grew alongside it. From the very first moment of rehearsal “on its feet,” Serban launched an approach that would become standard rehearsal procedure and the defining feature of the production, though no one, including Serban, knew it at the time. “What is ‘cormorant devouring time?’” he asked of the play’s opening speech (1.1.4). “Cormorant, a ravaging bird that feeds on corpses,” chimed in various people in the room, referencing different editions’ glossaries. Serban asked the actor to say “cormorant” more forcefully, evoking a bird of prey. The actor added a growl to his voice. “Not enough,” he replied. This time, the actor growled the word, flung out his arms to the side and curved them downwards to indicate a pair of wings. After working through the first scene in this manner, he called in the rest of the cast to “see the kind of vocabulary” they were beginning to establish for the production. Serban enlisted four “movement consultants” to help “score” the scenes in hallways and empty offices near the main rehearsal space. That he called it a “vocabulary” is appropriate, since for audiences it rivaled language as a system of meaning and in rehearsal frequently generated the kind of textual changes I discuss above.

These characteristics of the rehearsal process—namely, the fluid nature of the script and the development of a distinct, illustrative movement vocabulary—contributed to the production’s incompatibility with critique anchored in notions of Shakespearean literary authority. One audience member commented that it “was not *Love’s Labour’s Lost*.” It was not a recognizably Shakespearean *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, at least, so much had the production crafted its own “theatrical logic,” to cite David Kastan from his pithy discussion of the differences between text and performance in *Shakespeare and the Book*.¹⁴ A more productive dialogue, perhaps, would address how Serban and company used the text as part of their performance project, an acting thesis after all. One could say that they thematized the indulgent verbal play and capitalized on the lack of significant plot by bestowing theatricality and artificiality on all aspects of the production, from the bare set to the stylized gestures to the clownish costumes. The production produces comic pleasure and genuinely moving moments, such as the lovely collapse of language and gesture in Katherine’s memory of her dead sister, but Serban’s unrelenting stylization—and the

inconsistency of the student actors' attempts to ground it—often creates the effect of a shrill, hollow charade. Then again, one could observe that production, unwittingly or not, translates the play's critique into visceral audience experience.

Robert Brustein, celebrated critic and producer, among his many contributions to American theater, has said that there are two versions of Serban the director, one uniquely capable of getting to the "original energy" of a text and another "who is probably making the same effort but . . . being led off into gesture and illustration."¹⁵ "It is unnecessary . . . It is illustrative. It is not poetic," he says of the latter.¹⁶ An audience's frustration with the non-signification or inappropriateness of certain production gestures (such as the ramped-up artificiality of the ending, complete with paper-scrap snow and a blatantly fake screaming baby) is also the response voiced by the play's characters to excessive displays of wit. Rosaline's final instructions to Berowne insist on a corrective to such verbal philandering: "Your task shall be / With all the fierce endeavor of your wit / To enforce the pained impotent to smile" (5.2.840-42). She presses him to espouse wit toward a productive end, mirroring the kind of critique one could levy against Serban's production generally. What I am attempting here, clearly, is a mode of performance criticism that, without (according to Dobson) "contortions of language and expression"¹⁷ comprehends the production as a kind of "activity" of authorship. This means asking questions of the production, such as "To what extent is it generating its logic from the play?" and "From where else is it taking its cues?" An awareness of rehearsal practice, of which Serban's methods provide a heightened example, illuminates the legitimacy and necessity of such an approach.

Love's Labour's Lost at the Public

Indeed, a comparison considering the perspective of rehearsal to Karin Coonrod's production reveals that features of the text/performance dynamic that might seem exclusive to Serban's extreme theatricalizing apply to a more "mainstream" production as well. Coonrod's approach to rehearsals differed from Serban's in two central ways: The script and her basic understanding of the play were essentially "frozen" before rehearsals began, and she actively pushed psychologically realistic acting by encouraging the

actors to “own,” “land,” “really speak,” and “think the thoughts of” the language.¹⁸ Still, Coonrod established from the outset that the play *as defined in performative terms*—what she wanted to *do with the play* in the space—would be the production’s authorizing power, the “control.”

As she told the cast on the first day of rehearsals, “I want to create a company, I want to create American Shakespeare, and I want to rock the room.” (Hence the missing “u” in the British “labour.”) She tells her directing students at the Yale School of Drama that they need to “write in the space” with Shakespeare, and a 1996 *New York Times* feature on Coonrod quotes her saying that directing, for her, is “staging sculpture.”¹⁹ She wanted the “shape” of *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, which she defined as the movement from “monologue to dialogue,” to be in the actors “DNA” from the beginning. The play’s shape, as defined by Coonrod, infused not only the cuts to the text, but also the ways in which she formatted the script and presented it to the company. The email from Coonrod that accompanied the script several weeks before the first rehearsal shows performance and text collapsing into each other in interesting ways. “Below is the text in 11 scenes,” she wrote, without noting that most editions consist of five acts with seven scenes. She speaks to them about the play almost exclusively as she has been thinking about it for performance:

Have been a-thinking about this play for a long while and now I find myself imagining you all . . . in orchestration, in movement . . .

The lean budget drives us toward deep simplicity . . . and we shall take no prisoners . . .

There are three main groups: the lovers, the clowns and the messenger. Yet the story of the play divides into the King and his pals (the mainstream) and everyone else (the margins).²⁰

The script itself bears out this vision, with the character listing divided into those three groups and act markings excised in deference to the eleven scenes. It takes up eighty pages of clean type formatted in the standard mode of contemporary play drafts: character headings centered and capitalized.

Coonrod facilitates the development of an irreverent Shakespeare aesthetic in a highly controlled environment. It is

only after the actors "have their text"—that is, once it is grounded in action and intent—that she licenses the departure from it. If the physicality in Serban's production arose from stylized interpretation of literal meaning, the movement in this production often stemmed from the stylized expression of the actors' internalization of the text. Both modes illustrate Donnellan's contention that "words don't work" and that the text is a "tool" toward a performative end.²¹ Coonrod conducted what she calls the "holy exercise" with the company, in which they have permission "to occupy the entire space with the text." "Do anything you want—if you want to lick somebody in the face . . . go behind the audience . . . whatever you have to do, do it." She takes copious notes, sometimes pictures, and afterward the company talks about what happened. Much of the "wild stuff" that emerged in the exercise made it into the performance—including a moment when the King, when his own betrayal of the oath is discovered by Berowne, runs up through the audience, out of the theater, and back in through another entrance. "And it was the funniest thing every night," she recalled. The effect was achieved not only through the actor "having" his text, but also because he "voiced" it in a specific, boldly extra-textual way. Consider the number of different "authors" in this moment: director, performer, playwright, as well as the attributes of this particular theater.

This production is also a useful companion piece to Serban's because it was reviewed by a range of publications and therefore registers more formally how Shakespeare performance is frequently encountered "on the basis of a prior reading and interpretation of the dramatic text" rather than on the "textures and interstices of a particular performance."²² The reviews give an overall impression of neglect and excess, of the production at once ignoring the "bittersweet," more serious elements in Shakespeare's play and spilling gratuitously over its boundaries.²³ Elizabeth Vincentelli in the *New York Post*, pointing out the unusually high number of romantic pairings in *Love's Labour's Lost*, states, "But this wasn't enough for director Karin Coonrod, who . . . put the turbo on and upped the pace and antics times 10, while dropping the "u" in "labour." She describes the production's "exertions, all this expense of energy" as "draining" and without "the organic, effortless sense of mayhem" of a recent touring production of

Comedy of Errors.²⁴ *New York Magazine*'s Scott Brown also referred to the "pointedly and irksomely Americanized" title (admittedly calling himself a "grumpy Anglophile") and registered frustration that Coonrod "goes way out outside the text for laughs," including "spotlit pop-culture references" that "feel" a "little random."²⁵

The quibbling of these critics with the changed title is a case in point of the illusory nature of an assumed authoritative alternative, for the title page of the first quarto from 1598 in fact announces, "A Pleasant Conceited Comedie Called, Loves Labors Lost." It was on similar grounds that the *Village Voice* disparaged the production, consistently citing the play that Coonrod had failed to bring life: "At times, it's as if we're watching a different play, some knockabout farce, that has been dubbed into Shakespearean . . . By simplifying *Love's* down to a slap-happy rom-com about hijinks among four matched pairs of generic lovers (with some wacky hangers-on), Coonrod is apparently aiming to create *A Midsummer Night's Dream 2.0*."²⁶ I do not mean to invalidate their responses, but to demonstrate that "prior readings" of the play function as important criteria in their methods.

My hope is that a glimpse into the rehearsal period again reveals the unsuitability of such an approach and that the difficult task of extricating oneself from a notion of what the play should be in production, in order to evaluate the particular nature of the activity on stage, more closely aligns critical terms with those of the theater. If we now expect that Shakespeare literary scholars should have some basic knowledge of the material conditions of his theater, is it unreasonable to expect that performance critics should have a sense of the practices and conditions of the theater about which they write? Tiffany Stern's excellent *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan* (2000)²⁷ is one of numerous works that have irrevocably changed how scholars think about play-texts in early modern England. How can knowledge of *contemporary* rehearsal technologies change how scholars and critics think about plays and performances in our own time? If critics understand their preconceived notions about a play to be the gauge of a production's effectiveness, then they are indeed operating on totally different terms from Serban, Coonrod, and their companies. Out of the linguistic tangle and metatheater of *Love's Labour's Lost*, Serban and Coonrod forged distinctly performative controls—for Serban his

extra-linguistic vocabulary, for Coonrod her sense of the play's movement and shape. These, appropriately, as the term "off-book" implies, exerted greater influence as rehearsals went on. I suggest that a more nuanced understanding of professional practice can enable critics to better account for and evaluate a production's intended effects—what it wants to *do* with Shakespeare.

Notes

1. Declan Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2002), 67.

2. *Ibid.*, 183.

3. See, for example, W. B. Worthen's *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); "Texts, Tools, and Technologies of Performance: A Quip Modest in Response to R. A. Foakes," *Shakespeare* 2, no. 2 (December 2006): 208-19; or, most recently, "Intoxicating Rhythms: Or, Shakespeare, Literary Drama, and Performance (Studies)," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2011): 309-39.

4. Michael Dobson, "Writing about [Shakespearean] Performance," *Shakespeare Survey* 58 (2005): 169.

5. Margaret Jane Kidnic, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2009), 27.

6. I served as dramaturg for both productions.

7. James L. Calderwood, *Shakespearean Metadrama* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 56.

8. Andrew James Hartley, *The Shakespearean Dramaturg: A Theoretical and Practical Guide to the Role of the Scholar in the Theatre* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 95.

9. Sidney Homan, *Directing Shakespeare: A Scholar Onstage* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004).

10. Michael Flachman, *Shakespeare in Performance: Inside the Creative Process* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2011).

11. Ed Menta, *The Magic World Behind the Curtain: Andrei Serban in the American Theatre* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1995), 123.

12. Calderwood, *Shakespearean Metadrama*, 56. I was regularly present in rehearsals for this production and I quote Serban from my experiences there.

13. For *Twelfth Night* I cite William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008). For *Love's Labour's Lost*, here and going forward, I cite William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, ed. H. R. Woudhuysen, Arden Shakespeare, 3rd ed. (London: A & C Black Publishers, Ltd., 1998). All subsequent citations are to this edition.

14. David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare and the Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9.

15. Quoted in Menta "The Magic World Behind the Curtain," 134, from Ed Menta's personal interview with Robert Brustein, 12 December 1989.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Dobson, "Writing about [Shakespearean] Performance," 169.

18. Karin Coonrod, interview by Emily L. Madison, 25 February 2012. All quotes from Coonrod come from this interview I conducted with her after the production had closed.

19. Steven Drukman, "Realizing Her Dream of a Surrealistic Henry VI," *The New York Times*. 15 December 1996.

20. Karin Coonrod, "LLL: Some Thoughts and the Text," e-mail message to cast, 28 August 2011.

21. Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target*, 67.

22. Rustom Bharucha, "Foreign Asia/Foreign Shakespeare: Dissenting Notes on New Asian Interculturality, Postcoloniality, and Recolonization," *Theatre Journal* 56, no.1 (2004): 18.

23. Andy Propst, "Love's Labor's Lost: Theater Review" *Theatre Mania* 31 Oct. 2011, Web.

24. Elizabeth Vincentelli, "More Giddy than Witty: Theater Review," *The New York Post* 31 October 2011.

25. Scott Brown, "Theater Reviews: Off-Broadway with Tennessee Williams, Brian Friel, William Shakespeare, and Celine Dion's Dietary Habits," *New York Magazine* 2 November, 2011.

26. Jacob Gallagher-Ross, "Love's Labor's Lost Plays with Shakespeare at the Public" *The Village Voice* 2 November, 2011.

27. Tiffany Stern, *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).