How can high school and college teachers help their students get the most out of studying Shakespeare? In *Performance Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare*, Edward L. Rocklin offers teachers a wide array of concepts and practices to explore with their students specific performances as well as the performance potentials of a Shakespeare text. Examining drama as both text and performance opens up a range of actions that inexperienced readers can miss when they are limited to reading words on the page. The importance of analyzing and interpreting Shakespeare’s works becomes clear when students are encouraged to use their critical thinking skills to imagine and perform these texts.

To help teachers incorporate a performance dimension into their literature courses, Rocklin’s approach asks students to analyze, cast, rehearse, and perform parts of a play, as well as to observe, respond to, and learn from these performances. The many activities outlined in the book include making editorial choices, studying performance histories, staging scenes, and examining current productions through performance records, film, and video. After explaining the constitutive practices and models for performance, Rocklin provides in-depth lessons, including classroom discussions and activities, student responses, and carefully crafted writing assignments, to illustrate how performance works with three Shakespeare plays: *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Richard III*, and *Hamlet*. 

Edward L. Rocklin
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primary functions of the texts they create are pragmatic functions—or, as they would have thought of it in Shakespeare’s day, rhetorical functions. But I also stress that in studying plays by Shakespeare we have to work with all three questions and work in all three areas of semantics, syntax, and pragmatics.

From Text to Performance: Exploring What Dramatic Dialogue Does

Although we speak of the play as composed of “dialogue,” it is important to be aware that there is a fundamental difference between the dialogue embedded in most narrative fiction and the dialogue that constitutes almost the whole of the play’s text, even as it constitutes the verbal component of the performed play, since the stage directions and character descriptions disappear in performance. This segment of the introduction has as its primary function the task of immersing us in the challenge of exploring dramatic dialogue. I introduce this segment by explaining that since I have just claimed that I prefer to start with the question “What does X do?,” the only logical thing for me to do now is have the students do some acting. In this next activity, we move directly into the challenges entailed in reading playtexts, and the students move toward answering the question “What are the functions of dramatic dialogue?”

Performing “A Brief Drama”

The class counts off by whatever number is one-third of the total present, rounded up, so that you end up with triads and one dyad. If you have one student left over or if you have a student who absolutely refuses to act, you can ask that student to be a recorder, taking detailed notes on the performances that follow. As I hand out the text of “A Brief Drama,” I continue: “Read over this script, discuss it, make sense of it, argue about what it means if necessary, cast it, rehearse it, and settle on how you will perform it. In about fifteen minutes, each of the groups will perform in front of the class.”
CHAPTER ONE

A Brief Drama

A: Well all right you could get the men loaded in the other boats, get that out of the way.
B: They are in the other boats sir, they have been for hours. Now if we could just come to some—
A: All right, all right, hold your horses.
B: We—we ate the horses yesterday, sir.
A: Oh yeah, well I’ll be with you—
C: Did ya really eat the horses yesterday?
A: I didn’t—they did (hm, hm)—enlisted men.

I include here a record of two sets of performances, the first from a general education course and the second from an inventive group in an upper-division Shakespeare course, to help you envision what follows. First are descriptions of some of the main features in four performances of “A Brief Drama” from a general education class.

Group 1
This group featured a strong, emphatic A. They started with A facing B on a diagonal with C hidden behind A’s back (one of the more innovative arrangements). A was pushing to get things done, while B was exasperated with A’s hyperactivity and delivered his key line with heavy stresses: “We—we ATE the horses YESTERDAY, sir!” He was implicitly demanding that if A was going to be so peremptory, then he needed to at least know or remember what was going on. C darted out from behind A, who wheeled to face him, and his “hm-hm” came out as a snort of disgust, not, as it frequently does, bemusement. A had not forgotten nor was he surprised at the disgusting baseness of his men.

Group 2
This group did something that happens about every fourth time I have a class perform this activity; namely, they walked in a circle until the very end of the performance, in A, B, C order. The effect was of B and C trying to catch up with A, who was energetic, gestured the most, and became steadily more exasperated. At the end, they moved into an inward-facing triangle as they confronted one another and A gave up.

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Group 3
This very lively group produced the strongest A we had—a lion-voiced A, one student later said. A was in control at all times, and he surprised us by shouting, “I’ll be with you!” over his shoulder downstage at an invisible other. B was indignant and angry, her rising voice trying to prod A into action, but he remained calm, even stolid. C was writing at the desk, upstage and out of it until his head snapped up and he asked his question. His action left us unclear if he was a civilian performing paperwork or a superior officer, but A did not seem to show the deference we would expect him to show to his superior.

Group 4
Here was a pushy A, playing off against the calmest, most low-key B, almost sleepy-serene, not to be bothered, who said, “We ATE the horses yesterday, sir. . . .” shrugging, arms wide out, as if to say, “What can I say? What else could we do?” and “What’s done is done!” C, by contrast, was the brassiest, most inquisitive performance of this role, and in this case it was as if A and C were both trying to get B to respond, to have more emotion than he was showing about the event that they both found out of the ordinary.

And here are descriptions of performances from an upper-division class.

Group 1
This group put more thought into blocking than did most groups and set up a situation built around the desk at the front of the room. A, played by a small, slightly built woman, was seated in front of the teacher’s desk in one of the student note-taking chairs, looking nervous. B was upstage right, her back turned, disassociating herself, never once looking at A, never making eye contact, even when she glanced over her shoulder. As the dialogue commenced, C was tapping A’s shoulder, frantic to get his attention, circling him, while A avoided meeting his look—and thus C’s muteness became a focus of our attention. In the main dialogue, B delivered his
lines with great impatience and strong emphasis, looking up and away, disassociating himself, his foot tapping as his exasperation rose, and finally giving a snort of derision in the pause of “We—we ate the horses yesterday, sir!,” contemptuous of A’s inadequacy, indecisiveness, and fear, and having reached or perhaps gone beyond the limit of what he could endure. Meanwhile, C was getting more frantic until he finally rotated the desk chair 90 degrees so he faced stage left before demanding, “Did ya really eat the horses yesterday?” with a fearful urgency. The startling effect here was that C thus seemed to care about the horses, not to be idly curious, amused, bemused, or amazed, but instead desperate, stunned perhaps that they could have been eaten, almost as if hoping that A would admit that B’s words had been a joke.

Group 2
Blocking: A behind the desk, B on the stage-left side of the desk, and C on the same side but down front. Even before he spoke, A was pacing upstage center behind the desk, already angry. As he began to say, “Well all right you could get the men loaded in the other boats,” he smashed his knee (as it seemed) into the desk, so that he interrupted himself to yell, “Get that out of the way!,” turning beet-red as he did so. As the scene continued, A grew steadily angrier, and there was not a trace of joking in his final line. Unlike most As, then, he was always the dominant figure, and B’s quietness seemed to most of us to be a response combining fear with an attempt to pacify A. C spoke his line in the common “hick” interpretation, but he added “sir?” at the end, which of course made him part of the hierarchy—and also someone we had to see as either especially dumb for risking A’s wrath, or impervious to attack, insouciant, perhaps somehow having a license to ask questions, almost like a Fool. In fact, when we asked afterward, Margaret did not realize she had added the “sir?” and it may well have been an improvisation that responded to how dominating and threatening A appeared to be—a placatory gesture.
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Group 3
This group surprised us with an adroitly improvised setting and props. As they moved into position, C drew the skull-and-crossbones flag on the board, immediately creating a specific setting that was enacted by A, who stood on the desktop, manning the ship’s wheel. He had also turned a bracelet into a huge silver ornament in his left ear. He shouted his first line to his right, which provoked B into climbing to the upper deck. A’s shouting, unlike that of A in the first group, was the voice of a man in command and enjoying himself, heavily stressing words as if shouting over a storm. When B climbed up, he was clearly subordinate, even fearful, and he showed exasperation only when he turned away and muttered, “Oh brother!” under his breath before saying, “We—we ate the horses yesterday, sir.” At this, C, who had been seated below in front of the desk/deck, rose up and delivered his line, trembling so much that we had to wonder if he was shivering from fear, seasickness, or illness. Obviously, hearing about eating the horses added to his shocked and fearful state. Like group 1, this group had invented a production option for C that was out of the ordinary and yet strikingly effective. It also, of course, illustrated how much the more open nonverbal element could supply a context that transformed the meaning of the seemingly more closed verbal element.

Group 4
This group also had a prop, in this case a chair-desk, which C carried around as the scene began, hunched over, officially respectful but in fact insubordinately scowling. As A completed the first order to load the boats, C slammed down the desk, almost on A’s feet, so that A drew himself up with contained anger and snapped “Get that out of the way!” Again, the truth about the horses was a secret, so B whispered, “We—we ate the horses yesterday, sir,” but C overheard and was provoked into a Cockney snarl: “Did ya really eat the horses yesterday?,” anger, disgust, and contempt mixed together. C thus provoked A beyond endurance, so that A addressed the
last line to the audience, flung his notebook on the floor, and stalked off. In this group too, then, the main tension was between A and C, not A and B.

In the discussion that follows, my goal is twofold: first, to collect responses, noting what was striking about each performance and what the actors did that created the particular meanings projected, and second, to initiate one ongoing process involved in teaching Shakespeare, namely, the retraining involved in learning that in reading, rehearsing, performing, or watching drama, we are concerned with both reading differently and seeing differently. Besides the specifics we share, this segment takes another step in helping students learn to sharpen both their sight and their vision.

Establishing Categories to Describe What Actors Do

Before the class period ends, we quickly jot down a list of everything the actors did that “added”—and I’ll later (or at the next class) explain why I put “added” in quotes—to the text in creating their performances. This move often needs to be negotiated so that the students shift down to the appropriately concrete level: that is, students will often say that actors “added emotion,” and I must push them to produce detailed descriptions of the behavior that creates and conveys emotion. Once we get started, the board fills rapidly, until we have twenty or thirty items. Then I say:

Please categorize the list in some way that allows you to have three to six categories that cover all the things we have said the actors added. Remember that an ideal category system is both exclusive and exhaustive: that is, the boundaries between the categories can be sharply defined, and the set of categories as a whole comprehends the entire range of the phenomenon you are studying. This is an ideal that, in fact, many category systems do not and in some cases cannot achieve, but even if you cannot achieve this ideal, keep it in mind as a guideline. The categories you create can become a heuristic: a good set of categories becomes a set of questions that helps you cover the major variables as you try to imagine how a scene might be staged. And a good set of categories also provides us with a common vocabulary that can enable us to communicate
either what we perceive or what we imagine with greater precision and mutual comprehension.

If the class seems to be having trouble, I point out the obvious distinction between verbal and nonverbal items. This simplifies the problem, allowing them to concentrate on categorizing the diverse range of things actors do nonverbally. This is another activity students usually do in small groups, since debate about possible categories can provoke useful collaborative analysis, with students compelling one another to refine their ideas.

I then collect several of the categorizations by having one reporter from each team of students put that team’s categorization on the board. Then we discuss them, discover where they overlap and where they diverge, and in this way further refine our perceptions of what actors do to create meaning.

At this point, I also offer the class the set of categories presented by Daniel Seltzer in several essays on Shakespearean drama. As Seltzer himself puts it in “The Actors and the Staging,” he wants to present “four aspects of acting style which, taken together, cover everything an actor can do (physically) on stage”:

(1) *Stage business*, ranging from small details of action relating to the character’s own person to facial expressions and movement carried out on lines; (2) *Voice*, primarily in terms of pitch and volume, but including special uses such as parody, and extending as well to such matters as the pacing of speeches, special pauses, tonal quality, and the like; (3) *Stage movement*, in terms of “blocking,” but also considerations such as which areas of the stage were apparently considered “strongest” and which were utilized for different kinds of action; (4) *Address*, that is, literally the direction of the actor’s speech—when he is alone on stage (as when, in a meditative speech, he may as it were address “himself” only; or, in an explanatory vein, or comic routine, address the audience; or, in a speech of apostrophe, usually in strong emotions, address an imaginary hearer) or with other actors (when he may speak to one or more at a time, or speak without actually addressing any, or in asides to the audience, or alternate among actors, or between them and the audience; also when his speech covers the exit or anticipates the entrance of another actor). (38)

I resequence the list, making voice the first category. Voice, stage business, stage movement, and address, I suggest, are concepts
we can employ as we discuss the complex things we can imagine actors doing and the complex things we see actors doing, whether the actors are the members of the class, live actors at a performance, or actors in a film version of a play.

You also may want to use Seltzer’s categories as you start working on the first play. Ask students to read, say, a short opening scene or the opening fifty lines four times, using a different category each time to help them imagine a performance or performances; or create four groups, each group exploring the scene through the lens of one category. This exercise can also help students begin to discover how Shakespeare packs his lines with implicit stage directions. Again, you can use this activity as an assignment for small groups or in asking a student to direct a performance. Or it can be assigned as double-entry writing homework.

If, as frequently happens, we have reached the end of the period, I assign some or all of the following tasks:

1. List the steps in the process your group went through to move from asking “What’s going on here?” to its performance of “A Brief Drama.”

2. List features of the text (features you might ignore when reading fiction) that you had to pay attention to in carrying out this task.

3. Write a full description of how your group performed the scene, using the categories of voice, stage business, stage movement, and address to help you re-create what you did.

4. Write a narrative version of this drama: that is, embed the dialogue in the sort of narrative you would create if you wrote this as a short story. I will collect your narrative, but not the first three items.

A Note on the Rest of the Chapter

What follows from the action of performing “A Brief Drama” is a series of interlocking cycles of reflection and reaction in which students explore what they have done in order to discover some fundamental features about dramatic texts, about performances, about the relation of performances to texts, and about the constitutive elements of drama. The series is complex but also allows
for extensive adjustment and improvisation. Indeed, this book may be thought of as being like an accordion: I present this accordion with the bellows expanded, but you are free to collapse some segments, shorten others, and invent new segments, depending on your purposes, your students, and the time available. In fact, I rarely have time to do the entire sequence of activities in any single course, but, as noted earlier, I aim to offer more material than you can use in one term, trusting readers to design sequences that work for their own needs.

From Script to Narrative

So far, the class has focused on a script, moved from text to performance, and then stepped back to analyze some of the elements the performance offers the spectator that the text does not offer the reader. What I aim for in this sequence is to have students gain insight into the nature of the dramatic medium through a series of engagements that use contrast to lead students to answer the question “What is drama?” by answering two other questions, “What is the nature of the dramatic medium?” and “What does drama do and how does drama do what it does?”

Two principles are at work in this sequence of activities: (1) such a definition is best arrived at through direct experience of the different potentials of the medium to be defined; and (2) such a definition must also work through contrast with an alternative medium. The definition students need, after all, is not some verbal formula transmitted by the teacher, but rather a definition-through-action that enables them to experience the medium and to contrast it with a related yet different medium.

Thus the next step is to have the students translate “A Brief Drama” into a narrative text. I simply say, “Please transform this miniature play into a short story: that is, write it as a prose narrative. You need to keep the same seven speeches in the same order, but I want you to do more than just write a paragraph that describes the setting and then put the dialogue in as is at the end. You need to invent a context for the dialogue and then write a full-scale narrative that includes the dialogue.”
How can high school and college teachers help their students get the most out of studying Shakespeare? In Performance Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare, Edward L. Rocklin offers teachers a wide array of concepts and practices to explore with their students specific performances as well as the performance potentials of a Shakespeare text. Examining drama as both text and performance opens up a range of actions that inexperienced readers can miss when they are limited to reading words on the page. The importance of analyzing and interpreting Shakespeare's works becomes clear when students are encouraged to use their critical thinking skills to imagine and perform these texts.

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