

What is Embodied Language

Much of theater today is driven by visual storytelling, the creation of stage pictures that reflect *unspoken* realities or psychological states. Modern actors are taught to layer the psychology of the character on top of or underneath the words they speak – to play the subtext. Playing subtext is the technique of consciously divorcing the story being told from the words that are actually spoken, and can create a complex and ‘realistic’ portrayal of how language works in our society. In the real world too, we often divorce our embodied experience of the world from our language, reducing words to a mechanism for the objective transfer of data. And so in theater as we strive to hold the mirror up to nature, we do the same thing onstage; and in order to tell a dramatic story, we create it separately from the dialogue, the ‘story’ becomes what is added *around* the words. The words have become informational only.

And so, when we encounter Shakespeare’s dramatic poetry, we engage it first in a grammatical, visual way, to ‘figure out’ what information is contained, what it means. Then, doing our best to convey the grammatical structure (which often means ignoring or trying to cover up the poetic structure), we add our interpretation of the character’s psychology – the story – on top of the logical reading of the words. We try to tell the story around the edges, and hide the ‘unrealistic’ or ‘unnatural’ poetry with pauses and emotional posturing and physical bits, struggling to reflect what’s happening to us outside of what’s being said.

Shakespeare, however, worked in a society with a different relationship with language. His plays are written from an aural/oral paradigm, in which the psychological and emotional reality is expressed through the linguistic patterns and rhythms, as well as the sounds of the language. The dramatic story – the emotional, intellectual, psychological and visceral experience of the character – is held *WITHIN* the words and linguistic rhythms/patterns. They propel the actor to where he/she needs to go emotionally and psychologically, and play upon the audience in similar ways. The language *IS* the story.

If we are to successfully communicate a deeply truthful experience in a theatrical medium, we must once again merge the human beings/character’s/actor’s experience with the words he/she speaks. Instead of reducing and obfuscating the poetry’s impact by layering on top or beneath of it our separate ideas of character, we must embody Shakespeare’s language. The play’s humanity -- the story -- lies in the actor’s *embodiment of the language*.

The task, then, is to change our visceral relationship to language, to sensitize our body-mind to sounds and linguistic patterns, in such a way that we can allow the language to change/shape our rhythms and thus, our psychologies. This in turn, will allow the character’s (really Shakespeare’s) thought-rhythm-psychologies to show up through us. When we do this, the language plays us, takes us over and propels us into a psychological and emotional reality that communicates onstage. It also becomes much more understandable, because we are obeying its inherent rhetorical structure, and rhetoric is the 2,000 year old tradition whose sole purpose is to communicate effectively in an aural/oral medium.

GREAT, SO HOW DO WE DO THIS?

There is a huge area to be explored in how the sounds and textures of language can be embodied. Kristin Linklater’s and Shakespeare & Co’s work called *Sound & Movement* brilliantly addresses this. It is a terribly important work, and I strongly suggest that EVERY actor work to reintegrate their breath with the thought/feeling/impulse (Freeing the Natural Voice) and pursue a much deeper relationship with the sounds and texture of words. I suggest reading *Freeing Shakespeare’s Voice*. I incorporate much of this work into all of my workshops and teaching.

Another area of exploration is, of course, Shakespeare’s metric rhythms and verse structure, what I call his iambic jazz. Again, Dennis Krausnick, Shakespeare & Company in Lenox, MA, Kristin Linklater, Neil Freeman all have developed great training here, and I use their approaches in my work as well.

Finally, we come to Shakespeare's Patterns – his use of Rhetorical figures and words patterning to create argument and the linguistic psychology of character. My work is in two parts, training and practice. First we sensitize ourselves through rediscovering our natural connection and joy in playing with language using work influenced by Merry Conway and Lisa Wolpe. Next, we learn the four key patterns Shakespeare uses, what he uses them for, and how we can find them, feel them and play them. Then, we work to embody these patterns onstage, translating the linguistic patterns (which we often associate with intellectual understanding) to a physical experience *in our bodies* (kinetic) and *in space* (spatial). This real-time spatial realization of patterns is what I call the rhetorical staging techniques. These techniques result in coherent, emotionally and psychologically rooted blocking that allows actors incredible freedom onstage, while telling a theatrically compelling and accessible story to the audience.

Finally, we practice rhetorical staging within a performance context. Through a grossly truncated rehearsal process (less than 12 hours) that removes the ability to rely on most of your other training, we create a laboratory in which you have little other choice but to let the language play you. For more information about this follow the link to Bare Bard Labs.