'Finding a New Aesthetic:
Shakespearean Performance in the UK in the 21st Century.'
Project Report.
Matthew Bent

The project can be seen as divided in to three clear objectives: to determine whether or not David Mamet/William H Macy's 'Practical Aesthetics' can be applied successfully to Shakespearean text; to explore the extent to which placing scenes from these plays ['The Winter's Tale', 'Twelfth Night', 'Hamlet'] in different performance scenarios changes their meanings and character dynamics; and, using the textual analysis from the pragmatic approach already employed as a grounding, investigate how the techniques of various influential contemporary artists/theatre-makers can be used to clarify and make more accessible the meanings and character intentions of the often dense verse form.

Reflecting on the beginnings of this project now it seems incredibly broad. To encompass an investigation of the effectiveness of a 'Practical Aesthetics' approach to Shakespeare, across three plays, whilst also experimenting through the ideas of several performance practitioners was a huge remit for a 6 week project. So, over the course of those weeks the workshops gradually refined themselves to a more concise set of objectives, just as we gradually discovered exactly what forms of experimentation we were interested in. As we [myself, the six performers, Dramaturg, Movement Director and Producer who formed the workshop 'company'] developed our working method we cut away the focus on 'Practical Aesthetics', we abandoned *The Winter's Tale*, and left behind any desire to find 'real-life' contexts for the plays, in favour of simply *playing* with the text - in terms of the musicality of the language, it's reaction to pre-determined movement scores, and its imagery.

What we had found, at the end of our *Hamlet* sessions, was the beginnings of a new working methodology in which a variety of different sources - whether it be a gesture/movement sequence, a make-up design, or a 'found' object - could provide stimulus for a scene on an equal level to the written text. This way of working was greatly influenced by my discovery of theatre artist Robert Wilson and subsequent immersion in his work. Seeing his *Einstein on the Beach* live as a part of my research challenged many of my previously held ideas about how theatre should/could look and feel, and inspired me to see my work on this project in a different way. From this point on the work became much more about bringing multiple 'texts' to rehearsal, and seeing how they could 'speak to' our initial, written, text.

The multiple points of departure for experimenting with scenes developed in to ideas of the de-centring of the spoken word as the prime carrier of meaning in a *dramatic* scene, where the *action* defined by Shakespeare is still (for the most part) adhered to. Then, pushing the boundaries of experimentation even further, we played with removing any sense of dramatic action or character from the scene altogether and playing the text for its aesthetic properties as part of a *postdramatic*[1] scene. This was now a far-cry from the initial Mamet/Macy approach to text. In later workshops we experimented with dropping character intentions completely and just played with

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[1] This is the dramatic-postdramatic antithesis as defined by Lehmann in *Postdramatic Theatre* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006)

Shakespeare's language for its musicality, its sounds and its cadences, alongside our other, non-verbal, texts.

From the *Hamlet* sessions two workshops stand out as having been particularly successful in finding new perspectives on the text. In the workshop on act one, scene two of the play, I wanted to bring a pre-determined set of movements and images to the rehearsal and see how they 'spoke to' the text. In appendix A I have given three still shots showing the progression of images through the scene. In the first image we can see the 'building' of the scene. The performers walked very slowly (the performer playing Hamlet (far left) counting internally to eight with each footstep, the performers playing Claudius and Gertrude to 16 with each footstep) towards their positions in the second image, where they delivered the lines of the scene (omitting Hamlet's), before stepping down and exiting, again on a count of 16 for each step. Hamlet's lines during the main body of the scene were replaced by a repetitive series of movements designed to tire the performer out. By the time the performers playing Claudius and Gertrude had left, the performer playing Hamlet was visibly physically drained as she delivered the 'O that this too too sullied flesh would melt' speech.

The slow movement was brought to the scene with no particular ideas in mind for how it would work with or against the text. However, the feeling Claudius/Gertude's very slow entrance gave, continued long after Hamlet had reached her assigned position and begun her series of actions, was of a great display of power. This fed directly in to Claudius' speech: his first flexing of his political muscles as King.

The *Hamlet* session on act one, scene three initially followed a similar pattern - bringing ideas for images to the scene and seeing how it played out with these in mind. This scene, between Polonius, Laertes and Ophelia, is a very static one though and finding anything interesting to bring visually to a scene so bogged down by long speeches was proving difficult. At this point we decided to remove almost all of the text from the scene and experiment with different ways of communicating. The performer playing Laertes was the only one allowed to communicate through language - he selected a few lines at random from the long speech the character gives to Ophelia and was told to deliver them for the sounds of the language, playing with different inflections and intonations, but never speaking with a specific 'intention' in mind (in the sense of saying a line to get a particular reaction from a particular character, etc.). The performer playing Ophelia was given a very restrictive set of physical actions - sitting down, she could only move her arms/legs in certain directions, and was told to select a few lines from the scene and try to communicate their meaning through random vocal sounds instead of language (see appendix B). The performer playing Polonius, finally, was not allowed to make any sound, but instead was given the task of moving up and down a straight line in a clumsy, fast-paced walk. When the performer chose to he could stop, and had to spell out the line 'Neither a borrower nor a lender be' with his hand in the air.

The effect of this presentation of the text is of a collage - showing a variety of different ways of communicating which suggest no single obvious interpretation. The important word here is *presentation*. Instead of offering up an interpretation of Shakespeare's words and representation of his characters as grounded in a real life situation, I took influence from Wilson here in a desire to 'keep meanings open', to

allow 'numerous interpretive possibilities'[2]. The removal of character intentions and directly interactive relationships, as well as throwing out almost all of the text, created a non-dramatic scene in which the text and characters, as well as their relationship with the way the performers were moving, were presented without anchorage towards a certain meaning, and thus were entirely open to interpretation.

Throughout the workshop process a language developed amongst the performers and myself relating to our work. In the movement exercises, as we experimented with structured, 'non-naturalistic' performance styles, it was important for myself and the performers to be able to communicate effectively with each other. Thus a 'vocabulary' of set movements developed. Many of the sessions involved me writing this vocabulary up on a whiteboard, before we ran through a series of familiar exercises in which the performers could experiment with different ways of moving. The system we developed was made up of walks, gestures and 'punctuations' (joints that linked the different walks/gestures) as a structure for improvisation as well as for helping to determine the physical action of a given scene. The use of this structure brought a discipline to the way in which the performers moved, whilst also allowing them adequate room to bring something of themselves to the set movements, embellishing them with their own personal touches.

Having the time to allow this method to develop was essential, as was not having a deadline in the form of a public performance. As there was no real 'conclusion' to the work we'd done, I feel as though this approach of experimentation through bringing a structured and disciplined performance style to the staging of Shakespeare's plays, as well as pushing an overall equality of performance texts could make further discoveries in a similar, laboratory-style setting. However, with this philosophy of equality in *all* performance texts inevitably comes the necessity to try out these ideas in a public performance context, where aspects like stage lighting, costumes and music come in to the picture and must be fully integrated in to the performance design. Only when this has been achieved: when the work we have started with performers can be incorporated in to a cohesive whole based on the equality of performance texts, can we determine whether or not we have found something new for the staging of Shakespeare's plays.

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Appendices

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[2] Maria Shevtsova, *Robert Wilson* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) p. 70

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