

Shakespeare's Verse

a user's manual

by
ROGER GROSS

Shakespeare's Verse: A User's Manual for Actors, Directors, Readers, and Enlightened Teachers,
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*for actors, directors, readers,
and enlightened teachers*

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Shakespeare wrote
the world's greatest verse plays.
Almost all of them are performed
or read as prose, by default,
not by decision.
This is a tragic waste, but it is fixable.

This book has two goals:

- to persuade you that the great rewards
of verse speaking and reading are worth
much more than the modest effort required
to master them.
- to provide the information and guidance
needed to lead you down this path.

HOW THIS HAPPENED

Many years ago, I was the Artistic Director of the California Shakespeare Festival, an Actors' Equity company and a very good one. At our peak, many people told us we were the best acting ensemble in the country.

I believed it and there was good reason for it. When James Dunn and I founded the Festival, we had a dream and a plan. The dream was for a kind of vigorous, earthy, deeply humanistic Shakespeare. The plan was to hire the best actors we could find, to keep them together year after year, and to train them as well as to use them. The company included such fine actors as David Ogden Stiers (who, at that time, could play any male role in the canon), Kurtwood Smith, Dakin Matthews, David Dukes, Elizabeth Huddle, Carolyn Reed-Dunn, Joan Schirle and many others of great skill.

It was a wonderful dream and an effective plan. Within a few years, it produced shows of power and delight. We pleased our audiences and ourselves. We even pleased the professors of English . . . almost. But there was, too often, a qualification in their praise: "Wonderful, exciting . . . of course you massacred the verse . . . but it was great nevertheless."

I reveled in the praise and brushed off the quibble about the verse because, frankly, I didn't know what they were talking about. I thought we spoke the text very well. I now blush at the naiveté of my response.

After eight years of playing the dual role of professional director and full-time college professor, I had to make a choice. The Festival at this time was running two theatres for five months a year and needed to lengthen its season yet again. The time for riding two horses at once was over. I decided that my heart lay more with the academic theatre.

I brought a lot of things with me from the Festival. Above all, the nagging question, "What the hell do they mean 'we massacred the verse?'" I decided to find an answer to the question. It should be easy, I thought. I'll study a couple of the best books on speaking the verse and resolve that question.

What a shock to find that there were no such books. There were shelves of books about Shakespeare's poetry, that is, his metaphors and figures of speech and his other ways with language, but none of any value about performing his verse.

In my disappointment and eagerness, I did the obvious thing; I hurried to the professors who had complained so.

THE PROF

Well . . . you see . . . um . . . it's written in . . . uh . . . blank verse and . . . er . . . you need to speak it . . . that way.

ROGER

Yes, of course, I know it's blank verse. But what do you mean . . . "speak it that way?"

THE PROF

Well . . . you know . . . speak it as verse . . . blank verse.

ROGER

But more exactly . . . what were we not doing?

THE PROF

Well . . . um . . . the rhythm.

ROGER

Yes, what about it?

THE PROF

You've got to get it right.

ROGER

Could you be more specific?

THE PROF

Alright . . . it has to be like . . . blank verse rhythm.

ROGER

Which is?

THE PROF

You know: dee DUM, dee DUM, dee DUM, dee DUM, dee DUM.

ROGER

That's it? You don't mean that literally, do you? That every line should be spoken in that deadly humdrum beat? Actually many of the lines don't seem to fit that beat. Most of them have too many syllables and many of them seem to want emphasis in the wrong place. But mainly it just sounds boring: always a light emphasis followed by a heavy emphasis.

THE PROF

Well, it **is** iambic pentameter, and we should respect the playwright.

I admit that this is a bit of a parody of my conversations with many teachers. I expected them to know about the verse, these teachers of poetry and of Shakespeare. But the gist of it is true. In fact, when I listen to professors of Shakespeare and other poetry specialists reading Shakespeare aloud, I never hear them read him as verse. They sense, vaguely, that the productions they see are not done as verse, but they don't, in fact, know exactly what that means or how to speak verse themselves, with the exception of a precious few who are blessed with an intuitive grasp of verse rhythm.

I found, to my amazement, that skill in speaking verse was a lost art. In the nineteenth century, the scholars got interested in other aspects of poetry and lost track of some of the most fundamental facts and strategies of verse form.

This apparent dead end whetted my desire to know. Something convinced me that there was a lost treasure and it was findable. Turned out I was right. But rather than in the modern scholarship, I found my most useful study to be of the sources from approximately 100 years before to 100 years after Shakespeare's birth.

I've been working on this research project and testing the results in production for forty years. I came across a precious pair of 19th century scholars who looked carefully at parts of the territory which had been so completely ignored by the others: William Sidney Walker (*A Critical Examination of the Text of Shakespeare*, c. 1854) and E.A. Abbot (*A Shakespearian Grammar*, c. 1901). Much of value appeared in Helge Kokeritz's work (*Shakespeare's Pronunciation*, 1953).

As I searched, a few other scholars began working similar ground. For years I had the advantage of being the only researcher who was also a theatre person, able to fully test my work pragmatically.

Finally, in the last ten years, an awareness of the need has developed and a few accomplished theatre artists have spread the gospel. Paul Meier, an outstanding director and scholar, and Dakin Matthews, a fine actor, have published good, useful books to fuel the fire. Two of the great professional theatre artists, Peter Hall and Barry Edelstein, stepped forward to write strongly and soundly in support of the verse. Meanwhile, academic critics such as George T. Wright and Marina Tarlinskaja produced impressive works of scholarship which, however, did not deal with the issue of performance. Other academic critics did work so esoteric that they seemed unrelated to our topic.

A few others have very recently written chapters on "scansion" but most of these suffer from fundamental flaws and are based more on tradition than on research. They do not go deeply enough into the subject to serve the actor or student who wants thorough instruction in "how to do it." Somewhere in between lies Adrian Noble's useful "How to Do Shakespeare."

My special contribution has been to take what we have learned about the rhythms further, to explore the implications for performance. And I have found several patterns, Shakespearean habits, previously overlooked.

My research questions were:

- what was Shakespeare's verse form and strategy and what does it demand of us as actors, as speakers, and readers of his verse?
- what insights does verse form give to the meanings of the play, the life of our characters, and the demands and opportunities for staging?

The answers to these questions were much richer than expected and I'm here to share them with you for your profit and delight in what I believe is the first practical manual for Shakespearean verse speech and reading.

You may wonder why I keep referring to "verse reading." In case it's not obvious, I had better point out that everything you'll learn here about what makes Shakespeare's text verse rather than prose applies equally to acting and to silent reading. Verse rhythm yields its benefits wherever it is felt. Silent reading without an appropriate rhythm is as impoverished as prose acting of verse text.

HOW DARE I PRESUME TO SAY ALL THIS?

In my search, working in the world's greatest Shakespeare libraries, I explored the relevant prosodic and pronunciation evidence from 1450 till now, not just from versification sources but from a wide range of related territories. I did metrical analyses of not only Shakespeare but of other playwrights and poets, good and bad, from at least a hundred years before and after him. Amazing things of great value to actors and directors appeared.

None of this is merely my bright idea. This approach has been tested again and again in both the classroom and in most of the forty Shakespearean productions I have directed and the many more that I have produced or coached. Because this is a practical handbook, meant to be used by actors, directors, students and devotees “in the heat of battle” as you might say, I have not burdened it with the citations of the research that led me to these conclusions. What I have learned from experience, however, is that those who learn to speak according to the guidelines given here invariably sense the rightness and need no further persuasion. You can trust it.

This handbook is a practical user's manual based on what I learned. If you master what is here, your performances of Shakespeare will be richer and more powerful.

My greatest dream is that you will master these techniques, embrace the dream of Shakespeare played as verse, and will go forth to teach others to do likewise.

**“Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you,
trippingly on the tongue. But if you mouth it, as many
of our players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines.”**

–The Man Himself

TO BE THE BEST, WORK WITH THE BEST

It is a common belief that Shakespeare is the greatest writer in history. He is surely the most popular playwright. He was then; he is now. His plays are done all over the world. You wouldn't want to have to count the number of productions of Shakespeare each year. It is astonishing for a four-hundred-plus-year-old writer . . . for any writer of any time, any place.

In the first half of 2012, over twenty-five films were made based on Shakespeare scripts. No one else comes near. In 2000, the English voted him "Man of the Millennium." Not Playwright of the Millennium . . . Man of the Millennium. You can't watch a night of television without hearing some reference to Shakespeare, and not just in drama or in high-toned programs; he's in the commercials. Why? Because he's memorable. Because he said it better. It's hard to speak our language without quoting him.

In the acting trade, Shakespeare's scripts are considered the best of all training grounds. If you can master the problems of Shakespearean acting, you can handle anything. He used more of the possible playwrighting tools than anyone and therefore requires that actors have more tools. He provides a greater challenge and, therefore, a greater opportunity.

TESTIMONY OF THE SKILLED & FAMOUS

"There is no better way for an actor to train his intellect, his body, his breathing, his voice and his skills in communicating with an audience than by playing Shakespeare. It is an Olympic course in acting."

So says Peter Hall, founder of the Royal Shakespeare Company, long-time director of the Royal National Theatre of England, one of the best.

Shakespeare is like acting any other playwright. Yet there are crucial differences and until you master these special techniques, you'll never get to the heart of Shakespeare.

The most important difference is the speaking of the verse.

The actor's/reader/s job is to give us a line—so strongly charged that the audience can't help but follow the structure of meaning and feeling as Shakespeare imagined it.



THE PROBLEM

Most of what Shakespeare wrote, he wrote in verse. The problem is that almost all of us speak the plays as prose, not by choice but for lack of sufficient knowledge of the form. Speaking good verse as if it were prose is like performing a good song without the music.

This verse has the power to enhance the strength and clarity of Shakespeare's plays tremendously **with no loss of naturalness or spontaneity**. When it is spoken well, it affects the audience deeply without them being consciously aware that they are hearing verse.

To speak it well, you need only understand the simple rules of the form, apply them to each of your verse lines, and learn a few quirks of Shakespeare's pronunciation.

If you discover the correct rhythm for each line before you learn it, the rhythmic shape will become part of what you mean by the line, how you feel about it.

It will become the music you need to express yourself. This will protect your spontaneity and keep you from sounding pedantic or mechanical.

Shakespeare knew what he was doing. He made his music match his meanings. When you get the music right, it's hard to get the meaning wrong. Though the rules of the form are pretty strict, they aren't confining. There is still plenty of room for expression of the actor's and the character's individuality.

I want to repeat two of those sentences because they deal with the concern some actors have when they are asked to learn the verse system, the fear that they must choose between being correct and being natural:

. . . verse has the power to enhance the strength and clarity of Shakespeare's plays tremendously with no loss of naturalness or spontaneity. When it is spoken well, it affects the audience very deeply without them being consciously aware that they are hearing verse.

THE POWER OF HIS FORM

We aren't used to writers who have complete mastery of their form. Most writers are able to find only approximate means of communicating their vision. With such scripts, directors and actors grab a rough idea of character and action from the text and then follow their own imagination to invent a form that is mostly their own. For those of you who like technical terms, we say these writers suggest only a few **Parameters** and provide very loose **Limits of Tolerance** . . . like a cheap car. If there is little precision in the playwright's form, there will be a lot of latitude for free invention in the work of the actor and director and the limits of this invention are only vaguely drawn by the scripts.

With a fine sports car, you pay for the precision and you have to know plenty to get the best of it. Same with a fine play.

You have probably noticed that Shakespeare's scripts contain very few stage directions, probably fewer than you think since most of the directions in the modern editions were added by editors long after Shakespeare was gone.

Don't let the lack of stage directions fool you. It doesn't mean, "Whoopee! We're free to do whatever we want!"

Shakespeare gives an actor more precise information about how the play is to be performed than any other writer. That information is embedded in the verse form and in other poetic qualities of his text. It is implied by the verse rhythms and the textures of the verse. Information on speed, character, and every aspect of performance is waiting for the actor who is smart enough and ambitious enough to learn the language of dramatic verse. His Parameters are many and demanding and his Limits of Tolerance are tight and rigorous. Like that fine sports car.

At which point, I think I hear several sighs from the back of the room, maybe a mutter of “old fogey,” perhaps an outright confrontation from one of the bold ones: “Oh, man, there have been hundreds of far-out productions of *Hamlet*, no two alike, very interesting. Now you want us to make ‘em all alike? Boring!” To which I, sighing right back, say: “Yes, there have been several hundred honorable *Hamlets*, some brilliant and radically unlike what had gone before. What they had in common was that each fulfilled the **Parameters** of the script (i.e. was what the script implied a *Hamlet* needed to be) and each found its unique creative world, its unique portion of the **Latitude**, within the **Limits of Tolerance** implied by the script.”

Meanwhile, for every one of these, about ten others (some “far out” and some “traditional”) missed the boat, failed to be honorable productions of *Hamlet* because they didn’t fulfill those Parameters and/or lived outside the range of Tolerance implied by the script.

**THE THREE BASIC KINDS OF PARAMETER
LAID DOWN BY A SHAKESPEAREAN SCRIPT ARE:**

1. ACTION,
2. CHARACTER
3. VERSE RHYTHM

THE PATH TO ACTION AND CHARACTER IS VERSE.

Shakespeare’s scripts are meticulously, thoughtfully, crafted. His craft yields a commanding form that may be disobeyed only at great cost. At first glance, you may see nothing. The more you study, the more you will see.

And this will go on forever.

Verse is not a straitjacket. Verse is not a stifling limiter of your creativity. Verse is the firm foundation on which creative acts may be performed. This is the great liberator of Shakespeare's power, the key to his Inner Sanctum.

Once you have this foundation, this guidance system, in place, you will have the freedom to explore and invent, with the confidence that what you create will serve the text as the text serves you.

Learning to speak the verse is not a matter of academic propriety. It's not about cultural prestige or any other trivial motive. It is the secret of great Shakespearean acting. Master it and you will be miles ahead of the competition.

THE PAYOFF

If you make the smart choice, if you decide to invest the little time it takes to learn Shakespeare's way of doing things, you not only get the amazing bounty of interpretive help I describe above, but also the essential information which allows you to be Shakespeare's collaborator rather than his competitor or impediment. And you also get, for the same price, several other great benefits. (I know . . . I'm beginning to sound like a late-night TV pitchman. But it's true.)

About twenty of my Shakespeare productions were done after I learned the secrets of the verse. I was a pretty good director before I understood the verse and I built some very good productions which audiences liked a lot. I specialized in energy and athleticism, in fast, non-stop activity. I now blush to say that our slogan at the California Shakespeare Festival was "Blood and Guts Shakespeare." We wanted people to know it wouldn't be boring.

So the shows were good. But in some very important ways, they were better after I learned to teach actors to speak the verse. Here are the most important differences between verse productions and what you're used to hearing.

If you speak verse:

- **Your speech will be clearer.**
- **The play will move much faster.**
- **You will be more fully energized.**
- **The verse will exert a subliminal control of the audience making the play more effective and affective through interplay of the underlying meter and the immediate rhythm.**
- **The unity of melody and meaning will amplify all meanings and emotions.**
- **Clues to meaning will emerge.**