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KELLY HUNTER

CRACKING SHAKESPEARE

A Hands on Guide for Actor's
and Director + Video

BLOOMSBURY

CRACKING SHAKESPEARE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelly Hunter is an award winning actor, director and teacher. Over the last thirty years she has performed major roles at the RSC, National Theatre and English Touring Theatre. For the RSC she has played *Lola* in *The Blue Angel*, *Constance* in *King John*, *Hermione* in *The Winters Tale* and *Goneril* in *King Lear*. For English Touring Theatre she has played *Rosalind* in *As you Like it* (TMA Best Actress award) *Nora* in *the Dolls House* and *Mrs Alving* in *Ghosts*. She has also worked extensively in film, TV and radio.

Kelly is the Artistic Director of Flute Theatre. In 2014 she directed *The Tempest* for children with autism, a co-production for the RSC and Ohio State University. Her most recent production, *Hamlet, who's there?* performed at the Gdansk Shakespeare Festival in 2015.

She has directed numerous productions of Shakespeare for UK and US students including *The Tempest*, *King Lear*, *A Midsummer Nights Dream*, *Cymbeline* and *Macbeth* for BADA. For RADA she has directed *Twelfth Night*, and at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama she directed *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. She has also directed an all female production of *Hamlet* at Mount view academy of Theatre Arts.

She is the author of *Shakespeare's Heartbeat; Drama Games for Children with Autism* and is the creator of the Hunter Heartbeat Method, a series of sensory games using Shakespeare for children with autism. This work is the basis of a longitudinal study at Ohio State University. She is a longstanding teacher of Shakespeare at the Actors Centre in London, working there since 2002.

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**A Hands-on Guide for Actors
and Directors + Video**

KELLY HUNTER

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Prove true, imagination, O, prove true

Twelfth Night, 3.4

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This book is dedicated to the students I directed in *The Tempest* (2007), *King Lear* (2008), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2011), *Cymbeline* (2012) and *Macbeth* (2015) at the BADA London Theatre Program and the Wilde group at BADA's Midsummer in Oxford Program, 2008.

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INTRODUCTION

- How do I make Shakespeare's language mine?
- What does the iambic rhythm mean and how do I use it?
- What should I do when I first look at his words?
- When do I breathe?
- How do I stop myself doing a 'Shakespeare voice'?
[<https://vimeo.com/121688079>]

These are the kind of questions I'm asked again and again when I start teaching or directing a new group of students. I have spent over ten years defining the best ways to reveal the answers, drawing upon my experience of performing major Shakespearean roles so that students and actors may genuinely take ownership of Shakespeare's language. This book contains the games, techniques and exercises I have created during my productions and workshops with actors, students and young people around the world.

Understanding the rhythm, sound, structure, keywords and rhetoric of Shakespeare's blank verse is essential; there's no getting round it. In Parts One and Two of this book, each chapter takes a particular element of verse speaking and introduces techniques and exercises that you can practise alone or in a group. These teach you how to recognize Shakespeare's patterns of language, within which lie unique acting clues and psychological insights. As the book progresses, it will become clear how these elements of verse speaking are inextricably linked and your confidence will grow as you find yourself identifying the patterns and thereby taking possession of the plays for yourself.

As much as possible, I demystify the 'rules' of verse speaking, teaching them clearly and frankly, demonstrating how they always

relate to human experience and can be used by the actor or director to bring a character to life. Acting requires a constant balance of technique and feeling, and the particular challenge of performing Shakespeare lies in striking the balance between intellectual clarity and emotional soulfulness. An excess of technique will render you boring, whilst an excess of feeling may render you incomprehensible. The fundamental aim of the exercises is to allow you to capture the dynamic movement of thought from mind to mouth, as if you are speaking your thoughts for the very first time, embedded within which are your feelings.

It is equally essential, both for actors and directors, to fall in love with Shakespeare's words and forge their own connection to them. To that end the final part of this book concentrates on rehearsal techniques, with a focus on the physical embodiment and intense joy that can, and should, be generated through working on these plays. I have created and fine-tuned these games, playing them with students and actors at various drama schools, conservatoires and universities in the UK and the USA. Their effectiveness is wholly due to the commitment, talent and hard work of the students I have had the privilege of teaching and directing.

'The wound is open. The wound is peopled' are the last words in a short piece on Shakespeare by Harold Pinter in which he suggests that Shakespeare himself is ultimately unknowable and the mistake too often made is attempting to define him on our own terms. One thing is clear to me, as an actor you must 'keep the wound open' and bring a soulful availability to Shakespeare's words to create the space for the language to resonate. Your emotional reverberation is the bit that no one can teach you; everything else can be learnt.

A word on punctuation and editions

There is no 'perfect' edition of Shakespeare; in other words there is no irrefutable version from which all punctuation is set out as Shakespeare intended. Quite simply we will never know his intentions; furthermore since the plays come to life through sentient performance, an audience neither hears nor sees the punctuation. Considering that some teachers and directors work from scripts devoid of any punctuation,

whilst others don't even believe that a man called Shakespeare wrote these plays, it is worth accepting that you are dealing with an inexact endeavour, within which you must draw your own conclusions as to where the punctuation may originally have been. Every edition of Shakespeare varies depending on the editorial bias and therefore, in terms of punctuation, each edition serves as an informative guide for the actor and director, not as an oracle of truth.

My preferred text is Shakespeare's first folio. It is uncluttered and very beautiful to read. I bought a copy in 2001, together with an excellent dictionary of Shakespeare's words, and these two books have served me through the last fourteen years of teaching, performing and directing. If the first folio is not to your taste, find an edition of Shakespeare's plays that you like and use it with pleasure, making sure it becomes your well-thumbed and intimately known friend. If the punctuation within the speeches in this book doesn't exactly correlate with your version at home or in rehearsal don't panic, it's not a disaster, just follow the exercise and find out what sounds and feels most natural. An audience doesn't come to the theatre to admire your commas, full stops and semi-colons, but rather to follow your thoughts, feelings and emotional resonance. It's worth keeping this in mind as you study the techniques, exercises and games I offer in this book.

Many of the exercises are accompanied by links to online videos. A list of these links can be found at the back of the book.

PART ONE

**RHYTHM,
SOUND AND
STRUCTURE**

These three elements of verse speaking are so inextricably linked that splitting them into separate chapters is somewhat misleading, but also necessary for you to understand each one on its own terms. The rhythm and sound of Shakespeare's words are inseparable and, at the same time, offer different sets of clues as to the changing patterns of a character's thoughts and feelings. Meanwhile the structure of the verse tells you where to breathe and, in doing so, provides you with the means to appear completely spontaneous on stage. Although divided into chapters, consider these elements inseparable from each other – the verse will begin to come to life when the elements in this first part of the book come together.

1

RHYTHM

EXERCISES

- The emotional detective
- The glockenspiel
- Brain on/brain off

Iambic pentameter: The rhythm of your feelings

The first question I ask a new group of students is whether they know what the **iambic pentameter** is and crucially whether they know how to use it as an actor in order to deepen their understanding of their character's inner life. The answers to the first question range from 'It's the dedum dedum dedum thing,' to 'It's the natural way we speak,' (Is it?) to 'I've never heard of it.' There are no conclusive forthcoming answers to the second question. This first chapter is an almost verbatim copy of the way I introduce the iambic and how to use it.

What exactly is the iambic pentameter?

An iambus is the metrical term for a heartbeat: the natural inner rhythm of the human being and the first sound we hear in the womb. The rhythm has two beats, the first weak and the second strong: **Bu-boom**.

Pentameter means five feet – one foot equals one heartbeat – therefore the rhythm of one line of iambic pentameter, which underpins every line of Shakespeare’s blank verse, consists of five heartbeats that have a continual forward momentum.

Bu-boom, Bu-boom, Bu-boom, Bu-boom, Bu-boom

But the natural speech patterns of Shakespeare’s words don’t always ‘fit’ this iambic rhythm and it’s within these irregular patterns that you will find initial insights into your character’s feelings. To begin to understand how this works, first consider your own heartbeat, a fundamental task because as an actor you must bring your own heart and feelings to your character. The rhythm and rapidity of your heartbeat is constantly changing according to circumstance and emotion; it registers and reflects your feelings often before you have had the time to process your thoughts. For example, if while you were reading this book, a door swung open and a masked attacker entered the room brandishing a weapon and pointing it straight at you, your heart would undoubtedly ‘race’, ‘miss a beat’, ‘leap to your throat’ or indeed ‘stop’, at least metaphorically. Your understandable fear would register in the disturbed rhythm of your heartbeat, the adrenaline racing around the body forcing the heart into action.

Equally if the same door swung open and the person you had been secretly in love with all your life walked slowly toward you, your heart would undoubtedly register the event. Outwardly you might not move a muscle, but inwardly the movement of your heart would be virtually impossible to ignore. At the very least you might find yourself blushing. Your heart’s continual reflection of feelings creates an emotional barometer, registering your own authentic visceral existence. Similarly the changing rhythm of Shakespeare’s iambic is an exploration of the personal, intimate experience of life: *it represents the rhythm of your character’s feelings.*

Line-by-line, the changing patterns within the rhythm of the verse offer clues as to whether your character’s feelings are in their ‘natural’ state or whether they are heightened and if so by how much. These clues offer psychological insights from which you can start to deepen your understanding of your character’s inner life. The key question is this: How do I use the iambic to read these clues? The answer is to become a ‘detective of emotion’.