SHAKESPEARE QUARTERLY

Summer 1985

VOLUME 36, NUMBER 2

Published by the Folger Shakespeare Library

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Interview

Derek Jacobi on Shakespearean Acting

Perhaps I should begin by telling you that I think that in some ways you are better at doing Shakespeare's verse than any other actor I've heard. Would you be so kind as to talk a bit about how you approach it?

I try to make it as accessible, as understandable, as possible. With a lot of marvelous actors, when they get to Shakespeare there's a blockage somewhere. They start doing things they'd never dream of doing in a modern play. The art of contemporary acting, shall we say, or of any acting, is to make the words appear as though they're plucked out of the air—as if they've entered your brain at that moment and you've decided to say them—and you get rid of any hint of the lines having been written down on a page. That is part of the actor's craft. But when actors who are very good at that come to Shakespeare, very often they forget all they've trained themselves to do, because they can never forget the printed page. It's something to do with the fact that other actors have been doing Shakespeare for 400 years, I think. And also, there have been so many scholars who've said so many things about what it all means and how it should all be said. I have a healthy disrespect for scholars' punctuation, by the way. By the removal of a comma or a full stop, or by the addition of the word that begins the next sentence, a statement can mean other things. We don't actually know precisely what the punctuation was.

There's that. And then there's using every possible word that Shakespeare gives you, including the "ah's" and "eh's" and "oh's," which can often be indications of something other than just the word "oh" or the word "ah" or the word "eh." Also to make it—to breathe life into it as you would do, as we're talking now—to say the lines and comment on them in the same way that we speak now, so that it comes out as if it is your language, it is the way you speak, whether you're Benedick or you're Prospero or whatever. They must be the words you have chosen to say. You have to psych yourself out of the fact that the words have been said many, many times before. People collect the way they've been said; people collect performances. You have to forget about that. That's one of the great troubles about doing classical work, because you're always compared with whoever has done it before.

DEREK JACOBI was in Washington recently for the concluding performances of the Royal Shakespeare Company's touring productions of *Cyrano de Bergerac* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. On 15 February JOHN F. ANDREWS talked with Mr. Jacobi before an evening performance at the Kennedy Center. This interview is based on a transcript of that conversation.

Do you make that sort of comparison yourself? Do you ever strive just to do something differently?

I try not to, I try not to. I try to have the same thoughts, feelings, and mental and spiritual comment on the lines that I would if it were not Shakespeare. Something happens when it is Shakespeare. Actors put on a voice. Actors put on a way of standing. Okay, so you're in costume. You've got to learn how to live in that costume, not act that costume, in Shakespeare. Shakespeare's genius will see you through, because he chose wonderful words and he put them together wonderfully, and the sentences and the phrases are marvelous. If you change a phrase, everybody's sure that the rhythm is still there. It's going to have a poetic quality to it anyway just because of the way he expressed things.

When I was studying *The Tempest*, when I knew I was going to be doing it six months later and I was reading it, I was in Munich. I was playing Adolf Hitler on the television there. I was very immersed in Hitler then. And one day I had *The Tempest* with me and I was reading the fifth act over and over again. Maybe it was because I was playing Hitler and I was in that sort of mood anyway, a monstrous state of mind. But I thought whenever I'd seen *The Tempest*, that Prospero's usual character was like a kind of dry run for Lear. The message was "You must carry on." But I thought, why should he be so old? Suppose he's forty-five, my age. What kind of journey does he go through in the play? What kind of mental state is he in at the end? I was having difficulty, because it's a very lonely part. Prospero doesn't talk to anybody. He talks at them, he tells them what's going to happen, what has happened; he issues orders and commands, and he oversees it all; but he doesn't actually converse, not even with Miranda. And I looked through the play to find out if there were ever any points where anything that anybody else said affected Prospero. And they were very few and far between. Then I suddenly latched onto Ariel in the beginning of the fifth act when he says, "If you'd seen them, you would have been moved by them." Prospero says "Do you think so, spirit?" And that's it, that's the change, that's the moment. Prospero didn't know Ariel was going to say that. What was he going to do with them had not Ariel said that?

So what's Prospero to do now? He releases them. Usually the release of them is benevolent; he's suddenly a kind of Jesus, he suddenly loves his brother, and forgives them and does it all. Might it not be more interesting if it wasn't a benevolent forgiveness, if it was a forgiveness that had been wrung out of him because he wasn't originally going to forgive them? So he changes his mind. Ariel changes his mind. And from now on, what had been in his mind certain—he knew what he was going to do—from now on he's improvising. He doesn't know what's going to happen next, and he doesn't know absolutely how he's going to do it.

Well, this makes it much harsher. You have to get the cooperation of the other characters, of the other actors. So when Prospero says to Alonso, "Let me embrace you," it's not "Ah, you are forgiven. I love you." It's gradual. He embraces him, but his words become harsh and abrasive. He realizes that his former enemies haven't changed. He knows his brother hasn't changed. His brother doesn't say anything in the whole scene. So that lines like "Every third thought shall be my grave" are not Prospero's way of saying "I'm so old that when I get back, or I'll be so disoriented when I get back, or I'm going to die soon." No. He's saying, possibly, "I don't want to go back. Why go back to

a police state, after I've been away all these twelve years? There's my brother, obviously not repentant. Next time I'm going to give it a little more thought. I'm going to be more wary when I get back. And I'm going to be watching you, brother." Instead of just being famous speeches or a famous scene, then, it became a situation. It became a journey; it became something that has to be resolved by Prospero.

And then one day we decided that it would be rather good if he's in the mood for Ariel to leave and he doesn't see him go. So that when he calls to Ariel to free him, Ariel's already gone.

Was that your idea, or did it just happen?

That happened one day because Mark Rylance wasn't around or something. And we just carried on, and it kind of worked. And when Mark came back, we said, "Sorry, love, you've lost your entrance." So by the time Prospero gets to that last speech, he is absolutely drained, he is frightened, he is powerless, he's given it all away. Everybody's gone. The only way he can survive now is by begging the help of the audience to see that he gets back safely.

Do you often find that you make discoveries by serendipity like that, that something just happens by accident and works?

Yes. I love trying to find out new meanings for the lines, meanings that are attractive mentally to me, that are stimulating. So that it is *never* just the speech, it is never just words. Like when I did *Hamlet* on stage, I did "To be or not to be" not as a soliloquy, but as a speech to Ophelia. It wasn't the gimmick of an actor thinking "Oh, I've come to these speeches; now what can I do that is new?" I took it from the text, and I've argued this with several weighty professors, and I make a reasonable case. Again, it has to depend on Ophelia; she's very important. Because what do the actors do if Hamlet is saying "To be or not to be" to her?

You played it that way in Elsinore, didn't you?

Yes. And my reasons for it were purely textual. But there was one point in *The Tempest* when—this is an extreme, this is absurd—I wanted to die, I wanted to die as Prospero. This was early in the game, but I wanted to play him with a brain tumor. And at various places during the play, you saw that there was something wrong with the man's head. It stemmed originally from the fact that I thought, "Oh, am I too young for Prospero? Will they accept it?" But then I noticed his references to "my old brain" and "my beating mind" in Act IV. And yes, I thought then, perhaps, yes, perhaps—brain, mind—perhaps he's beginning to lose all these things. Perhaps something has gone wrong. Perhaps he has overworked it. And at the end, "Please, you draw near" meant that he was having a spasm. He was saying not "Come to my cell," but "Can somebody help me? I'm going to go."

And then my director said, "That's fine, but how do you do the epilogue?" I said, well, you make it purely theatrical; you make it purely an actor who gets up off the floor, takes off his wig, and says "Ladies and gentlemen. . . ."

I think that would work.

"My old brain is troubled." Obviously it was an experiment I had to go through because it was worrying me. But then, of course, you could also say that anybody who can bring the dead back to life, as Prospero says he can do, must have a brain many, many, many thousands of years old. But the operative word is "troubled," not "old." Of course, the brain was old; it's got all that knowledge in it. But the meaning of the line is that it is a *troubled* brain, not that it is an old brain.

Derek Jacobi

To answer your question, that approach to text—it's what makes playing Shakespeare so marvelous. It's detective work.

Do you find, after a production opens, that you're still learning things about it as you do it?

Oh, yes. All the time. Particularly with such a dense script as *The Tempest*. *Much Ado* is not really so dense as that. But even with *Much Ado*, there are places in the text where the punctuation is open-ended. At the end of the gulling scene, Benedick comes out of hiding, and it seems to me that the actor has his full bent. "Love me? why, it must be requited." "If you get rid of that comma after why and add a question mark—"Love me? Why? It must be requited"—the audience laughs, it's funny, it's of the situation, it's what Benedick would say. It upsets some people; it upsets some professors. Also, when Beatrice goes out again in that scene, Benedick says "Aahh. . . ." Well, there's a professor at Stratford who says that I'm acting like a stand-up comic here, making funny noises to an audience. Yes, it is a funny noise, but Shakespeare wrote it. He

wrote "ah." And I would contend that one way of saying "ah" is "Aahh." Isn't it true? It's in the text.

Stick to your guns.

I will. I will.

Because a few professors are now discovering that they can learn at least as much from watching an actor like you as they can from working in the library.

Well yes, I did *Hamlet* in Peking and Shanghai, and there was a lovely old professor who came to see it. He hadn't seen the play, and he came to see it and brought this 25-page thesis about why it should have been "sullied" and not "solid" flesh. He came to the play, and he came up to me afterwards. I think I said "solid," and he preferred "sullied." And he said, "What I had forgotten is that in performance it doesn't matter. In performance it takes less than a second, and it doesn't matter. In the performance you said the word and I understood the word, whether it was *solid* or *sullied*. It doesn't matter in the context of the whole because you were showing me your feelings, and I was receiving your feelings; I was understanding your feelings, I was understanding what you were saying." So the great debate no longer applies. The great debate only applies in the confines of a study, or a classroom, or a library. In the theatre, the impact, the communication, is immediate.

I understand that you visited the Folger a few weeks ago. If you had a chance to work near a library like that, would you find anything in it that would interest you?

Yes, I did that day. Several of the scripts there, prompt copies with actors' underlinings, showed you how Irving and Booth said some of the lines. That fascinated me, oh, yes. That I thought was wonderful.

There was one occasion, back in 1974, when I was giving a tour to Donald Sinden and Elizabeth Spriggs. When we got down among the First Folios, she wanted to hold a copy, so I put one in her hands. She then turned to Merry Wives *and told a story about having played Mistress Ford in Stratford in 1969. She said that in the pre-rehearsal period she was having trouble getting into the part and had just about given up. So one night she decided to give it one last chance. She retired early, and turned once again to the script of the play. But once again she found that she was fighting it, just wasn't getting anything out of the words at all. But then suddenly she had the sensation of a presence in the room. The sensation lasted about fifteen minutes, she said, and she was persuaded that it was the ghost of Shakespeare. And after it was over, when she returned to the text, all of the words that had been just ink on the paper came alive to her. She went on to give what at least one critic described as an inspired performance. And she said that ever since then, whenever she's done Shakespeare, she's had the sense that Bill was sitting on her shoulder.*

Oh, that's a marvelous story!

But you haven't had that kind of experience?

No. But I felt very creative in Stratford during the 1982 season.

Is there something special about working in Stratford?

Yes, I think so, if you have aspirations to be a classical actor anyway, to actually do Shakespeare in that setting is wonderful. It's quite extraordinary, actually.

What are the roles you haven't done that you would most like to do?

I'd like to do a Timon. I'd like to do a Scottish. I'd like to do a Richard III. I'd like to go on stage with a Richard II.

I thought your television Richard II was wonderful.

Oh, I'm glad. That role I hadn't done in the theatre, so perhaps it worked better on television—because I had no preconceptions about it. It was for the television. Hamlet I had done a lot in the theatre.

I gather you weren't allowed to do some things on television that you'd done on stage.

I felt a bit constrained in my soliloquy, yes; perhaps that showed. I'd like to do Coriolanus.

Have you done Lear?

Oh, no. That's the big one. That I think will have to be another five, six years. I'm not yet in my fifties.

What is the most satisfying role that you've had so far? What has brought out the most in you?

Oh, I think Hamlet. I adored doing Hamlet. Adored it. I liked playing King Navarre in *Love's Labor's Lost* too. But I think Hamlet.

Did you find that any of the treatment of revenge in Hamlet *carried over to your playing of Prospero before the abjuration speech?*

No, because there was a good two-and-a-half years between the finishing of the Hamlet and the taking up of Prospero. No, with the Prospero, as I say, it happened in that café in Munich. I suddenly thought, it's got to be harsh. I can't suddenly become Jesus Christ again, being loving to everyone. I've got to be trying to be and not totally succeeding, so that it's wrenched out of the man, this forgiveness.

I think you have to have that to have any dramatic tension.

I think so. Otherwise it becomes just a poem, it's undramatic. What is Prospero playing here? If he's just been playing nice guy, he's just dishing out forgiveness. You've got to see what it's doing to the man to do this, having done what he's been doing all evening. There must be a payoff, there must be

an effect in the man. Okay, so he's a duke; okay, so he's a magician; okay, so he's a father. But he's also that human being, that man, that you want to get to know. And he leaves it till very late, because he's overlaid the forgiving Prospero with all the other personas. I think the ending is the perfect place to show what goes on in Prospero as a man.

Back to the verse for just a moment. You are one of the few actors I've seen who manages both to get the sense, all the emotion, and at the same time retain the meter. It doesn't become prose on the one hand, and it's not sing-songy on the other. Does that come naturally with you, or do you have to think about it?

No, it's been acquired. It comes through practice, through a great desire to make Shakespeare accessible to an audience. I've sat in audiences and I've played to an audience whom I have known are there in spite of themselves. They're not really understanding what you're saying. They're looking, and they're listening, but they're not really with you. Not really. They're bored. They wouldn't say that they're bored. But they're not sharing, they're spectating, seeing Shakespeare, watching Shakespeare. My aim is always to try to discover a way to share the play with them just as if it were a modern play. Get rid of that "Oh, it's Shakespeare, I don't understand it. Shakespeare really bores me." It's just acquired by practice, I think, and by working with an audience and working on the text.