

The Bare Bard Experiments: Rhetorical Staging Techniques in Practice

Overview

Developed at Maryland Shakespeare Festival between 2007-2009, Bare Bard is a term used to describe a weekend-long theatrical exploration that uses rhetorical staging techniques in an 'unrehearsed' approach to Shakespearean performance which both trains actors and creates spontaneous, immediate and visceral performances of the plays.

Purpose & Results

Shakespeare used rhetorical patterns to consistent dramatic effect. By grouping the aural schemes that appear in Shakespeare's plays into the four basic groups of Repetition, Balance, Expansion, and Contraction, consistent *theatrical* functions emerge, and modern actors and directors can begin to gain access to the complex system of figures and to use them onstage. The structure of the poetic verse has, for some time, been used to trace, experience, and communicate the emotional experience of a character onstage through governance of the actor's breath and connection to the heartbeat/heartbreak of a line. In a similar manner, the rhythmic qualities of rhetorical patterning can be used to trace, experience and communicate the interior psychology and structure of the actor/character's tactic or argument. Lastly, the physicalization of these groupings can create coherent and theatrically interesting staging with little or no direction.

The Bare Bard experiment seeks to create an immersive environment in which the actor can be given a visceral understanding and theatrically useful experience of the four basic kinds of rhetorical patterns. In addition to a broad introduction to the four basic groupings and their function within the plays, actors undergo a physicalized rhetorical training that explores the rhythmic dynamics of each group and how that rhythm can be used. Finally, through a grossly truncated rehearsal process, actors have a real time opportunity to practice rhetorical staging within a performance context.

Some of the uses of rhetorical patterning onstage include:

1. Shift in breath and so emotional/intellectual state by creating the form of thought and inner psychology...(mixed up, rapid-fire cacophony of the asyndeton)
2. A clarifying of complex thought and argument
3. An ability to more directly play objectives, and affect partners or pursue tactics
4. An immediate and theatrically viable staging of scenes in a manner that elucidates the story and character
5. A juxtaposition of thought to emotional reality held within the poetic verse line

Other Results

- A more complex telling of the story through individual actors' commitment to their character's linguistic rhythms and perspectives and lack of a 'unifying' but also limiting directorial vision
- A more interactive and deeply connected relationship with the audience through the spontaneous environment and original practices
- A greater ambiguity between performer and character which enhances the theatricality of storytelling and sense of event

History

Started in 2007 as a staged reading series, the Bare Bard experiment and actor training grew out of Maryland Shakespeare Festival's Artistic Director Becky Kemper's growing interest and research into Shakespeare's use of rhetorical patterning and early modern theatrical process, as well as a dissatisfaction with actor's ability to bring Shakespeare's linguistic complexity to stage in a clear or theatrical manner. Convinced that Shakespeare, as a man of the theater, would not have used merely literary flourishes, she began to track where the certain types of rhetorical patterning appeared in the plays and what functions they might serve. She discovered that the rhetorical devices fell into four groups based on their structure and how Shakespeare used them consistently. Her further research into Shakespeare (as well as his actors' and audience's) probable education, suggested that not only was the rhetorical structure of Shakespeare's plays theatrically relevant, but that it played a role in early modern staging practices and rehearsal process.

These theories were introduced academically in three staged readings in spring of 2008, but the results were dissatisfying due to limited physicality available with scripts in hand. This led to the development of the BARE BARD weekend model in which training and pre-memorization allow actors a more active theatrical laboratory. The truncated rehearsal process was initially modelled on Patrick Tucker's work with the Original Shakespeare Company, adapting his methodologies for unrehearsed Shakespeare. The Bare Bard methodology soon, however, incorporated the burgeoning rhetorical staging techniques, and began to further focus on training actor's facility with Shakespeare's text.

Unexpectedly, by 2009 the Bare Bard's Experiment, which had begun as a performance laboratory and exploration of academic theories had become a successful performance program of Maryland Shakespeare Festival, and now performs to sold out houses. This success is attributed to the spontaneous, even dangerous, atmosphere of the performances which prove refreshing to audiences used to more carefully staged and safe productions, as well as the incredible clarity of text as performed by a company now deeply trained in the rhetorical staging techniques.

Methodology

Before the Weekend – Preparation Materials

- Packet of Information sent to Actors 4 Weeks prior
 - Script includes rhetorical breakdowns and top/tail blocking
 - Memorization guidelines... prepping for physical training: balancing time & space, journey of expansion, crush of omission, repetitious gesture
 - Theoretical Overview
- Actors memorize learning patterning and line endings
- Props & Costumes Pulled (in consultation w/ actors)
- Platt Created

Friday Afternoon

- Verbal overview of rhetoric staging theories (orientation for new folks and review for veterans)
- Table work (not everyone)

Friday Night

- Meal
- Ensemble/trust/ play momentum building
- Physical warm up that connects sound and language to physical impulse
- Land Court Improv: combining argument w/ rhetorical tactic
- Come & Play Expansive Journey
- Show & Tell ... found object comparisons
- Crunching of time
- ?? Inference game
- Circle Sharing/Feedback
- Dance/Song rehearsal
- Costume distribution/discussion

Saturday

- Warm Up
- Top/Tail Blocking (Became unnecessary...)
- Train Wreck Rehearsal
- Spot and Verse Work
- Actors create their track sheets or Fill in Blank Platt Backstage
- Two hour break
- Focus up/ Dance/Fight Call
- Performance

Sunday

- Debrief
- Train Wreck/Spot rehearsal
- Warm Up
- Perform
- Community Discussion/Talkback