

Eugenia Low: 5 tips for performing Shakespeare's verse

Posted By *Susan Elkin* On Jan 30, 2017 @ 7:00 am

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East Asian actor Eugenia Low has just finished playing Ariel in *The Tempest* at the Cockpit Theatre (<https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2017/tempest-review-cockpit-theatre-london/>) ^[1], having studied under and worked with director Lizzie Conrad Hughes on several other Shakespearean ventures. Low trained at the Actors' Temple and with the London Group Theatre. She opens in three short plays by Asian writers at the New Diorama on February 7.

1. Be imaginative

Shakespeare's writing can be analysed for all sorts of poetic devices (alliteration, rhyme, metaphor, onomatopoeia), but as a performer the most important thing is to see how these devices engage your imagination. Don't hold the text at arm's length as an intellectual consideration, but rather savour the sounds using the full range of your voice and actively paint pictures with the words using the full range of your imagination.

2. Be energetic

Drive through to the end of lines and don't let the energy drop. The last word of each line is often the most important, so it needs to course with energy. When a sentence or thought carries on beyond a single line, sustain the last word of the first line and use that energy to drive into the following line. Doing this will evoke a feeling in you, connecting you to the thought and thus creating your performance for you. Similarly, where words are repeated, and especially where the 'rule of three' applies ("Words, words, words", "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow"), set up the idea, build on it and then top it off.

3. Be playful

Look for opportunities to be playful within the text and enjoy playing the twists and turns to the full. If your text contains comparisons that set two things off against each other ("Now is the winter of our discontent / Made glorious summer by this son of York... Our stern alarums chang'd to merry meetings / Our dreadful marches, to delightful measures"), commit fully to the attitudes towards each thing that your character has and enjoy hitting both sides to make the apposition clear. Where your text contains contradictory thoughts within a speech ("Tis but a peevish boy – yet he talks well / But what care I words? Yet words do well / When he that speaks them pleases those that hear"), make the changes clear and specific. Separate the thoughts and moments and enjoy the build-up of fizzing energy.

4. Pace yourself

Let Shakespeare guide the pace at which you speak the text. If you have a tendency to speak quickly, be aware of the techniques Shakespeare inserts into his writing to help slow you down when the verse needs it. The use of monosyllabic lines ("To be or not to be", "Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day", "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad") positively invites the actor to slow down and give full consideration to each word. And notice the numerous occasions when pairs of words invite clear separation. When the end consonant/vowel sound of a word is the same as the start of the following word ("unable limbes", "fowle lake", "I'd divide", "that thou", "thee in"), don't elide the two words together. Instead, finish the first word fully before starting on the next.

5. Find the groove – then break out of it

Use the iambic pentameter – the Shakespearean heartbeat – as your starting point for the rhythm of speaking each line. Let it lead you, almost mechanically, to the words you emphasise before you impose your opinion on the line. Sometimes this throws up surprises about the possible meaning and importance of a particular word.

Having found that groove, however, the pattern can then be broken with significance. Lear’s “Never, never, never, never, never”, for example, is a perfect reversal of the iambic. It viscerally makes you feel the breaking of Lear’s heart as the heartbeat reverses. A changed rhythm usually signals emotion in the character. Yielding to it helps to tell the story and adds depth to your performance.

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[1] The Tempest at the Cockpit Theatre: <https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2017/tempest-review-cockpit-theatre-london/>

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