

RSC Playmaking Festival - Movement

Ingrid MacKinnon is a dancer, movement director and choreographer. Her recent work with the RSC includes: #WeAreArrested, Kingdom Come and the First Encounters with Shakespeare touring production of The Merchant of Venice. Here she provides an insight into her process and some guidance on using movement in performance.

This resource is a guide on you can how to use **movement** with your work on a Shakespeare play. It will give some meaning behind what is meant by 'movement' for theatre and help to shed light on the role of a 'Movement Director'. It will begin to outline some basic principles and suggest some tips or activities to create a physical world for your play.

What is Movement

To begin with let's talk about what we mean when we talk about 'movement' and its relevance in making theatre.

Movement is everything. It's in virtually everything that we do. Even when we think we are standing as still as a statue there is movement in our breath. Our ribcage expands as we inhale into our lungs and as we exhale, we can feel and see our ribcage soften as a response. When we talk about "movement", we are talking about everything that makes us human, in fact you might be moving a part of your body while you're reading this! So, when it comes to theatre we are telling human stories and using movement becomes vital to that story-telling.

The broad definition of movement in a play, is anything that helps drive the physical narrative or storytelling. This could include:

- the energy of the ensemble
- the celebratory dance at the wedding
- the physicality of a character

and/or

- the transitions between scenes and acts.

It is all of these things and more. More specifically, when we talk about movement we are talking about the physical language of the play that underscores the text which is very similar to the way music might be used in a Shakespeare play to help the audience feel a certain emotion or foreshadow a crucial moment in the plot.

From a theatrical standpoint, it can be really useful to remember that characters will move differently depending on a number of different factors, including:

- their cultural backgrounds,
- the different climates or circumstances they live in
- and sometimes their age and gender.

For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, the two main characters are quite young and most of the other characters are older. You could use movement to help create a feeling of youthful energy whenever Romeo and Juliet are together in a scene to give

us the sense of young, energised love. Possibly they never really stand still for too long, it always feels like they are playing tag or hide and seek around each other. So, Juliet's physical energy might change when she appears with Lady or Lord Capulet compared to when she is with Romeo. She may be restless with Romeo and have more stillness around her parents possibly.

So how do you get your actors to do all of this? First, it's worth keeping in mind that you should aim to create movement that works for the bodies/people that are part of your cast. You do this by collaborating with the actors to help generate ideas and create a movement style. You can start this process by giving your actors or students a physical game or physical task to do and see what comes out of it.

Activity – Physical Game: You might ask your actors or students to perform a scene where everyone has to be on different levels, and doing different things. Sitting on the floor, standing and moving (walking or running) around the space. When one person sits, the other two have to be either standing still or moving around. It could get quite exciting and offer some movement ideas just from having some fun. For extra fun, you can “imagine” the floor is hot like lava, so that way nobody is sitting for too long! This would definitely help create some energetic, youthful movement for our Romeo and Juliet characters.

Activity - Physical Task: Working with two characters, such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from *Hamlet*, come up with three different ways that they may greet each other. This task is really useful because the actors can create movement material that they have ownership of and that they understand in relation to their character.

- The first one could be a handshake, which doesn't have to be limited to our hands. It could be elbows taps, fist bumps, shoulder to shoulder or even foot to foot
- the second one could be a particular way that they nod their heads at each other
- the third one might be a silly dance move they do whenever they see each other.

Now you have some movement material that you could try with these two characters meeting in different circumstances (e.g. at a joyful celebration or a sombre funeral).

A game or task like these ones, will help your actors create movement gestures or material that they understand. Most times you'll find that actors will do more with their bodies when they find their own way in. However, if you are working with students it will be helpful to make clear suggestions and then let their movement imaginations soar. Most of the time, the actors will come up with the solutions once they are given the opportunity to get creative and play.

The role of the Movement Director in rehearsals

In the professional theatre, the role of the Movement Director would be to help create this physical language in collaboration with the actors and the Director. The Movement Director will always have their attention focused on how the movement ideas, gestures and sequences fit together with the play as a whole. This is important because audiences experience and understand the narrative of a play in

many different ways. Sometimes having a visual representation of what the world of the play is about is really useful. For example, in the recent First Encounters: *The Merchant of Venice*, we discussed how the play centres around trade (both business and personal transactions) so we wanted to create the world of markets and trading for the audience, before the actors even spoke. We created a short opening sequence with the cast using music and movement. There were characters working in the market doing heavy labour; a character giving orders; some were selling their wares and some were counting money; while others were offering a warm greeting to an old friend.

It is very helpful to use the language to help create the physical world of the play. In, First Encounters: *The Merchant of Venice*, the first words that Shylock speaks in Act 1 Scene 3 are “*Three thousand ducats, well.*” Possibly Shylock thinks about money quite a lot, since the first words that we hear her speak involve a conversation around large sums of money. So we created a movement sequence for Shylock where she counts her money in public; a gesture of wealth, importance and swagger. Another character, Antonio, has a movement clue in his first line in Act 1 Scene 1 “*In sooth I know not why I am so sad*”. Therefore, his gestures in the opening sequence were much more considered, careful and placed, the way that we all might move when we are deep in thought. These particular interpretations of the language are examples of how you might use a line of text to help create gestures for characters as well as movement sequences.

Group Movement

There may be a moment in your play that requires the whole ensemble to do a large movement sequence. This type of group movement may be necessary for a moment such as a battle, a celebration, a festival or even a storm. In many of Shakespeare’s plays, you will find these moments that can be really fun for the whole cast to be involved in if possible. I suggest that you start off with a movement idea first and then see where, how, and if it can be repeated to achieve an element of theatre choreography. It is really useful for the sequence of moves to be set by you (as the Movement Director) so that everyone understands how to do it and feels comfortable especially if there is music involved. Simplicity and clarity are key here.

Activity- To create the feeling of a storm you could use the four elements, (wind, fire, earth and water) to get your actors moving. If you start with water, you could ask them to move like water and then ask them to move like they are in water. Go through each element, letting everyone have an exploration and some fun. Divide the actors into four groups and assign them an element. You can mix up the groups so that you have wind, fire, earth and water everywhere in the space, and then ask everyone to move at the same time. This should create a wonderful organised chaos that hopefully makes the perfect storm.

Activity - To create a celebration dance, you could think of a social dance that you know or even better ask if the students know any current social dances. Take elements of the dance that are easy to repeat (such as clear arm gestures or a foot pattern) and have everyone repeat the social dance throughout your celebration scene. This could create a dance that everyone can do and will hopefully help drive the narrative in moments where text is not present.

Having said all of this, the movement should feel as though it belongs within the world of the play, adding life and breath to that theatrical world.

So, as long as all of your gestures, character physicality, transitions and group movement sequences are always telling the story of your Shakespeare play, then you are most certainly on course to creating a vibrant and dynamic physical world.