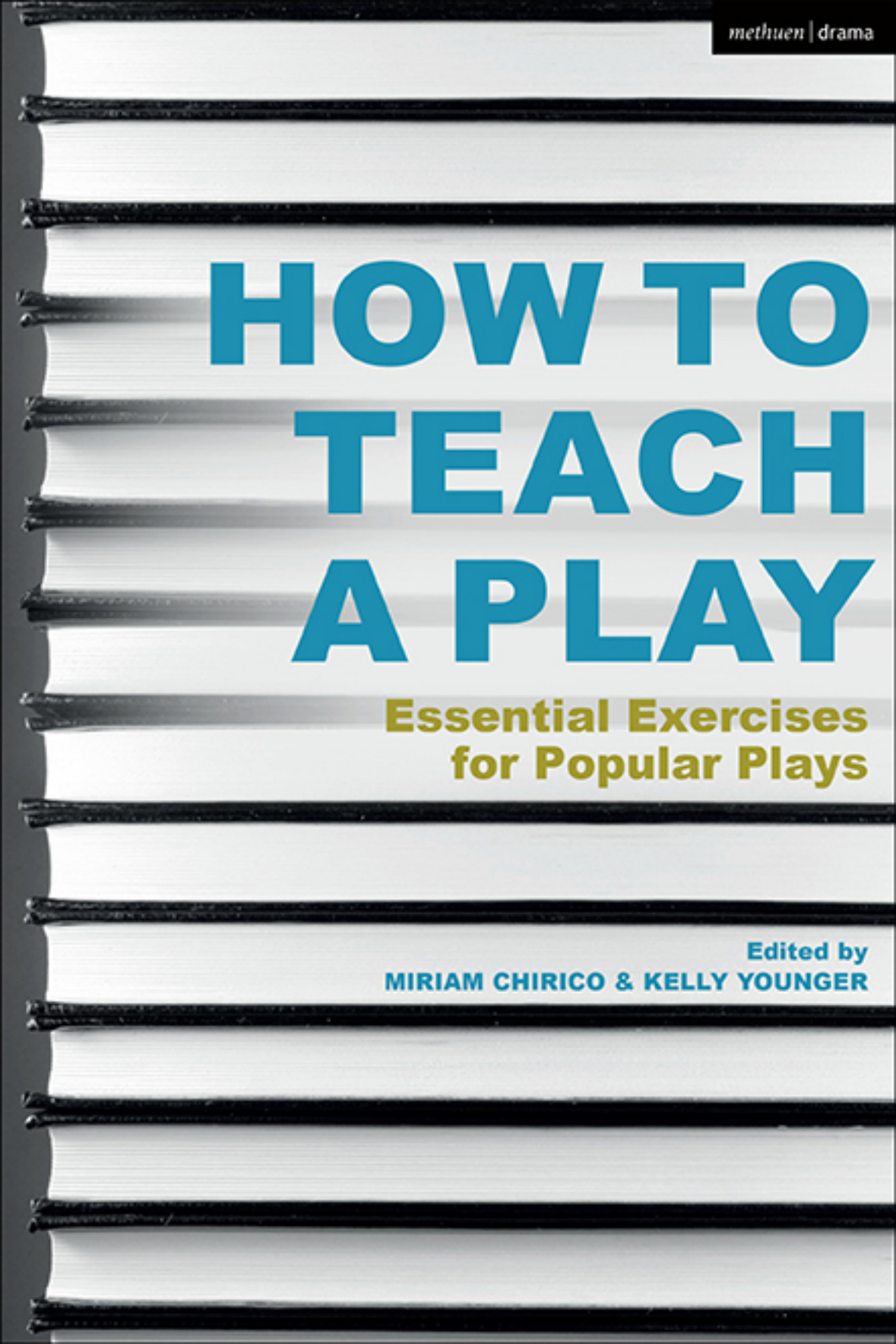
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HOW TO TEACH A PLAY
Essential Exercises for Popular Plays
Edited by
MIRIAM CHIRICO & KELLY YOUNGER

How to Teach a Play

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MEASURE FOR MEASURE BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Nicole Sheriko, Rutgers University

IN BRIEF

Highlight the play's surveillance culture and its uneven economies of knowledge and power.

PURPOSE

In all of Shakespeare, but especially in *Measure for Measure*, monologues are interpersonal. They reveal something about the person speaking as well as the person listening.

The exercise aims to stress the ubiquitous presence of the Duke as a shaping force for characters' actions in the play. His disguising and eavesdropping often enable him to collect knowledge and then leverage it like a playwright or director to script dramatic events—a bed trick, a head trick, and his own unmasking—to produce himself as the events' hero.

PREPARATION

Students should have read at least up through Act 2, Scene 4, before class, preferably the entire play.

MATERIALS

Cell phone.

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Nuts and Bolts

1 Assign the parts of Angelo and the Duke. Have these students stand at the front of the room. The Duke should have a cell phone.

2 Angelo will read a soliloquy twice. The best choice thematically for this exercise is his speech at the beginning of Act 2, Scene 4, before Isabel returns (see the Appendix on Companion Website).

3 For the first read-through, as Angelo speaks, the Duke should eavesdrop on him and record his actions with a cell phone camera (no actual recording is necessary). It is most effective if the Duke walks around Angelo, scrutinizing and filming him silently from all angles. Throughout, Angelo should deliver his monologue as if the Duke is not there, just as the original script suggests. This first round aims to suggest that the Duke is always watching and gathering information, even when he is not physically present in a scene.

4 Ask the students about the power dynamic between the Duke and Angelo. How does Angelo's ignorance of the Duke's spying impact his behavior? It can be useful to point to Angelo's interjection to himself, "let no man hear me." How does the Duke's awareness of all Angelo's actions shape his relationship to Angelo? How and why does the Duke record action in the play even when he doesn't witness it?

5 After this brief discussion, the actors will perform a second read-through. This time, the Duke should stand in front of Angelo, facing him (slightly off to the side so both readers can be seen). The Duke should feed Angelo his lines one sentence at a time, like a stage director directing an actor: the Duke will read a sentence and Angelo will repeat it.

6 Ask students again about the power dynamic between the Duke and Angelo. How does dictating Angelo's speech differ from simply observing it? How are spectating and directing related in the Duke's role more broadly?

7 Use these questions to lead a discussion about the relationship between knowledge and power and the Duke's leveraging of both to create political theater. How does the Duke leverage his position as a spectator to facilitate major actions in the play, behaving like a kind of playwright or director? Linking this moment to other scenes where the Duke is physically present to eavesdrop can be a helpful transition into thinking about the Duke's surveillance in relation to his project to observe the city's affairs in his absence (e.g., Act 3, Scene 1, when he has "overheard what hath passed" between Isabella and Claudio in prison). You might also connect this exercise to the broader surveillance culture at the Renaissance English court if the course is invested in the play's historical context.

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Reflection

This exercise doubles as an opportunity to focus on a key speech in the play and to understand personal crises as related to the Duke's larger project for the play as a whole. It can precede or follow a close reading of the speech's arguments. Repeating each sentence in the second round offers a second benefit of slowing down the language and attending to the passage's shifting moods. In addition, highlighting the fact that even private speeches do not occur in a vacuum also invites students to think about Angelo's long and complex speeches as actions and reactions rather than stand-alone poems. In addition, when performed early in discussion of the play, the exercise helps to illuminate some of the Duke's early expository speeches about leaving Angelo in charge to take the fall for his own failure to enforce strict laws and his existing sense of Angelo's hypocrisy. Though the Duke actually performs neither direct observation nor directing in this scene, inserting him here helps students to see his surveillance and social experiment hanging over the entire play. Using a student's own cell phone to "record" Angelo encourages students to draw parallels between the play's complicated sense of privacy and surveillance and similar cultures in their own digitally mediated lives.

Understanding the Duke as a playwright-figure helps students to see how he manipulates events for heightened drama, as in the final act when he withholds the information that Claudio is still alive in order to heighten Isabella's joy when she discovers he was not in fact dead and for personal gain as he scripts himself as the hero undoing injustice. Students become increasingly attuned to the power dynamics of interpersonal relationships in the play and how they overlap with differences in knowledge. They raise questions of agency and recognize the play's coercive forces as coming from more than Angelo's lechery. More broadly, the exercise's attention to the relationship between the Duke and Angelo lays the groundwork for ongoing comparative conversations about the characters framed as the hero and villain of the story. At the end of the play, students can draw parallels back to this exercise as they wonder whether the Duke's proposal to Isabella is any less problematic than Angelo's.

In my experience, students also learn to think about theatricality as not just a feature of the play but an approach individual characters can take to shaping the world around them, considering theater as a social and political tool. Thinking about a theatrical sensibility as something that can animate a character expands their sense of how plays think about their own theatricality beyond more obvious metadramatic tools.

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THE TRAGEDY OF KING LEAR BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Nicole Sheriko, Rutgers University

IN BRIEF

Highlights how larger political hierarchies are reflected in interpersonal relationships.

PURPOSE

From the moment King Lear divides up his kingdom at the beginning of the play, his once-powerful position begins to degrade. As the new rulers increasingly deny his authority as a former king and their father, Lear finds himself with few loyal companions. The Fool, who serves Lear as the kind of household court entertainer often kept by wealthy families, is one of the characters who stays by his side. The power dynamics of Lear's relationship with the Fool function as a microcosm of the larger play, manifesting Lear's shifting social position in personal interactions. This exercise presents two differently hierarchized versions of their relationship and offers a range of models for how each character sees his place in the world.

The exercise also efficiently illustrates a key variation between the two *King Lear* texts, pulling apart versions of the Fool often collapsed together in conflated versions.

PREPARATION

Students should have read up through Act 1, preferably the entire play.

MATERIALS

A chair (the taller, the better).

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Nuts and Bolts

1 Place a chair at the front of the room. Assign the parts of King Lear and the Fool. (The three very short lines by Kent can be read by the instructor so as not to distract from this duo.) Lear and the Fool will read through their dialogue in Act 1, Scene 4 twice, positioned each time in a different configuration. They will begin reading from the Fool's first line in the scene ("Let me hire him too. Here's my coxcomb," line 81) and end at the arrival of Goneril ("Here comes one o' the pairings," line 164).

2 For the first read-through, the Fool should be positioned higher than Lear. The Fool can either sit or stand on the chair and Lear should sit or kneel on the ground. This first read-through loosely approximates the Fool's character in the earlier quarto version as a satiric fool criticizing Lear.

3 Ask students how this spatial configuration shapes their sense of Lear and the Fool as characters. What does it suggest about their relationship to one another?

4 After this brief discussion, the actors will read the scene again. For the second read-through, they switch positions so that Lear is higher than the Fool. This second read-through loosely approximates the Fool's character in the later Folio version as a gentler companion under Lear's care.

5 Ask students how this new spatial configuration shifts their sense of Lear and the Fool as characters? How does this hierarchy suggest different possibilities for their relationship to one another? Ask the performers how swapping positions changed their experience of reading for their characters.

6 Use these questions to lead a discussion on Lear's shifting social position in the play. How does Lear's treatment of the Fool (or the Fool's treatment of Lear) relate to Lear's fall from power? Discuss what function this relationship serves in the play. Why do these men stick together? More broadly, how do small shifts in performance suggest important differences in how the play uses these characters?

Reflection

Focusing on just two men who remain together through the play helps students to locate larger themes of power, loyalty, and service in interpersonal conversation. In this way, students understand the play as not a political tragedy about Lear's fall from rule but a human one about the changes power effects in personal relationships. Representing the hierarchical relationship between both men in a visual way with the elevating chair and the (often

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uncomfortable) floor draws students' attention to the subtler ways that uneven power dynamics manifest themselves in the play. The students who performed the two characters sometimes find that having to look up or down at their stage partner unintentionally shifts their delivery of the same lines. In the text, students begin to notice small markers of relationships embedded in the dialogue, such as terms of address like "my boy," "sirrah," or "nuncle." Reading through the scene twice in two different configurations also helps to establish early on that Lear's status and his relation to other characters are highly unstable. Even within this single exchange, Lear and the Fool assert themselves to different degrees at different points.

Paying close attention to the Fool in particular also facilitates conversation about a question consistently raised by both students and critics of *King Lear:* How does a joking clown fit appropriately into such a dark world? Resisting the centuries of productions that left out the Fool entirely, this exercise offers students a way of exploring the stakes of his involvement. Playing with the power dynamics between the two men helps students to understand the wider role the Fool has to play and raises larger questions about the role of comedy in tragedy—is the Fool a comfort or a violence to Lear in his tragic moments?

For a performance-oriented classroom, one of the challenges and pleasures of teaching *King Lear* is that it has no single definitive text and thus an even wider range of possibilities in performance than most single-text plays. In particular, the Fool's character and relation to Lear are meaningfully different in each, shifting broadly from a bitingly satiric fool (with an extra song critical of Lear's political choices) to a more childlike figure of pathos under Lear's care (with an extra prophecy like those attributed to "natural" fools with "simple" minds). By loosely suggesting the different models offered by different *King Lear* texts, the exercise also allows me to talk about how plays evolve in print without bogging the class down in a comparative textual study, skipping ahead to discussing how shifting one character slightly can reshape a play in major ways. More broadly, the exercise illustrates a complex textual tradition in a way that attunes students to the ways that dramatic texts can also be reshaped by different emphases in performance.

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