

Chapter 1 Losing the lines

Practical problems

Planning any theatrical performance rests on weaving together three basic strands: the cast, the stage and the text. Any teacher who has been involved in school productions, or indeed productions of any amateur nature, knows that the pool of players varies in gender, quality and quantity from year to year and from production to production, giving no regard to the type and structure of your school or organisation.

Today, most schools are no longer single-sex, which can cause a problem with the selection of texts. It is a simple fact that finding a suitable text to match your actors can be a real challenge. It is also frequently noted that Shakespeare, the staple diet of ambitious drama clubs, rarely writes more than three good roles for women in a play. Hence, audiences have applied the *suspension of disbelief*, to allow a female Malvolio, Prospero or even Julius Caesar. The best roles go to the best actors, regardless of such small matters as whether they belong to the correct gender. In recent years, various professional actresses have graced the stage in all-female productions of Shakespeare (there have been some notable female Hamlets) and there has also been a fad of all-male productions, attempting to recreate the original productions of Shakespeare's day.

So the problem of the players is real but is there to be solved. That of the stage demands an element of creativity. There are, of course, schools with amazing drama facilities, sometimes at professional level. Others may struggle. A large number may boast a simple stage with limited to almost impossible entrances and exits, built mainly so a Headteacher can enjoy an elevated view over the school population. Peter Brook in his book *The Empty Stage* showed how it was possible to free a play of the limitations of the stage. Once the idea of separating the actors and the audience in the traditional manner has been challenged, then all sorts of new possibilities present themselves.

The third problem, and the one most in focus for this book, is the text. Student actors today, or budding amateurs, often find the plays of Shakespeare a real challenge. The long speeches of the Greek tragedies go one step further. Time needed to learn such speeches is almost unthinkable in a modern school. Yet to give up on these plays would be to rob the students of an opportunity that has life-changing potential. How many people can say, *I was Julius Caesar* or *I was Antigone*, *Medea*, or even *a guard in Oedipus the King*?

The *Plays in Two Days* method in its basic form frees actors from the tyranny of the text and paradoxically, allows an increased concentration on them. There is no room for studied method acting here, since time constraints will not allow an actor to *become* a character; nor are the efforts of the students and the Director any longer concentrated on learning lines like a parrot, but instead, on delivering lines in record speed that will be meaningful.

All *classic* drama, by its very survival, speaks not just to its own age but also to every age. Therefore, the drama must relate to the issues and lives of the students themselves. By removing the principal difficulty of learning the words, it is possible to open up plays to reveal large themes which are often lost when the main concentration is on the problems of language. This process takes the play out of the classroom and into the fun of the theatre. It certainly changes the challenge facing a Director and makes the process of rehearsal considerably quicker and more focused.

One central part of the process is that the language itself must not suffer from any kind of *dumbing down*, an obnoxious phrase with which our newspapers bombard us daily. The focus should not be on changing the words but on how they are to be presented to the actors on the screen – and this has to mirror the delivery of the lines to the audience. Essentially, the plays need to be edited so the actor can grasp the rhythm of the language simply. The focus has to be on keywords that help the actor and provide imagery to the audience, for example, in *Oedipus, the King*, the word *cancer*.

Technical issues

When constructing a script for use on screen in this situation, a great deal of attention must be given to the minutiae of the production itself. If a script is being developed for first time use, then it will almost certainly be developed in an application such as Microsoft Word. However, if the finished file is to look identical on different computers, by far the safest thing is to use this original Word file as a *pdf*, or *portable document file*. One thing the finished *pdf* can do is to identify the moves of the actors. This embraces not just *Enter* and *Exit* cues, but whether a character should sit or kneel, shout or cry, cling or repel. Instructions in the *pdf* must be immediately obvious and separated from the text to be read, for which the simplest approach is to italicise them. Certain key phrases or words to be read in the speeches can be made bold, and in particular, the separation of lines can help the actors to deliver scripts much more meaningfully than might otherwise be the case. This technique is especially apposite in plays such as Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, where the original line endings make for very difficult interpretation, but a basic reorganisation of the lines and their structure can render something both easier for the actor and more effective for the audience.

If the production team are up to it and a script is being developed for first time use, much of this work can be done on an evolving script during the rehearsal itself, but this requires regular changing of the *pdf* files on the multiple devices being used. In this instance, a master laptop is used to create the Word file, export the *pdf* files and then install them onto the other, *slave* devices. A runner with a USB stick can be very useful for ensuring this works smoothly: with a little practice, it is surprising how quickly a whole set of scripts can be changed: what is, of course, utterly essential, is that backup copies are made at every stage, or the whole play could be lost.

One problem facing those who choose to put on a play is that of copyright and performance fees. It is important to consider this well, before choosing what to do. In the productions described here, copyright and performance fees were never an issue, because Julian Morgan's translations were all original works and the texts of Shakespeare are both freely available and adaptable. For those whose in-house capability does not rise to making their own translations or to creating good, workable *pdf* scripts, we can provide some assistance, we hope. A short commercial break follows...

There is a companion volume to this one, called *Three tragedies... No tears*, available from Amazon, which can also be bought as a set of downloadable pdf files, usable for the processes described here. In addition, there are individual iBook translations available on the iBooks Store of *Oedipus the King*, *Medea*, *Antigone* and *The Bacchae*, which may also be usable for the task of staging a production.

Further information about all of these titles and links for purchasing can be found at www.j-progs.com. If you are feeling adventurous, scanning this QR code will take you to the Index of this website.



Today's brash and desensitised user of modern devices may dismiss some of the approach described as old-fashioned. *Why not use wi-fi? Why not link all the data projectors together? Why use a system which may have been up to date in 2005 but seems antiquated in 2015?* The answer is simple. This is not an exercise in using technology *per se*. It is an exercise in creating a theatrical production, which must be as safe as possible in front of a live audience. Old (or *old-ish*) technology is not bad technology, if it can guarantee this end. Using wi-fi may well be a great idea – but take a USB stick with you, just in case. Linking projectors together is a huge risk, because if one system goes down, so do all the others: having three or four laptop and data projector systems working independently should ensure that at least some of them are working for most of the time. And actually, what does it matter if it's a PC, a Mac, or whatever, as long as the performance is protected?

At different times, experiments were made using PC (or Mac) laptops and iPads. The iPad experiment was deemed too risky by different operators, because everything depends on accurate functionality of the scrolling process and the use of a mouse and mouse wheel connected to a laptop seems to offer a more stable and reliable combination. It is known that there are some software solutions for iPads and other notebook devices which can act as speech prompters, but using a *pdf* on a PC laptop was found more or less totally reliable during all of the four productions described here. If it ain't broke...

Making it flow

In printed editions of plays, the character name is often given in capital letters in the middle of the page. This is highly distracting for a production based on reading from a *pdf*, mainly because it eats into the space on the screen from which the actors must read. For this reason, hanging indents are an effective solution, allowing the writer to keep the character's name on the left of the screen and the text aligned to the first tab position. Italicised stage directions can be adjusted to suit, either aligned to the left with the character's name, or to the tab position of the lines to be read. In either eventuality, they must not impinge on what the character will be reading aloud during the production, or the consequences will be most unfortunate.

When reading from the screen, actors need to have a clear font in sight and at a size which suits the occasion. One question to be considered is whether black letters work better on a white background, rather than white letters on black. Our experience has been that this is indeed so, though in outdoor productions at night, the opposite seems to be the case. Further discussions will follow in this book about the number and positioning of screens, for which there are lots of different possibilities.

After considerable experimentation, it was found that a simple serif font such as Times New Roman would serve most effectively at a size of about 18 points. Most essential is to watch line ends, ensuring that no text should spill over too far to the area on the right of the screen and that line breaks are made often enough to prevent this happening.

As stated earlier, the generation of a *pdf* file from an original word-processed file is essential to maintain a consistent appearance across different systems. Saving the file in this format is the best way to guarantee the safety and consistency of formatting and styles in a script. As the computer operators (the *scrollers*) get to work, they may or may not need to adjust the zoom factor on their screens, to ensure maximum screen-fill for their own devices.

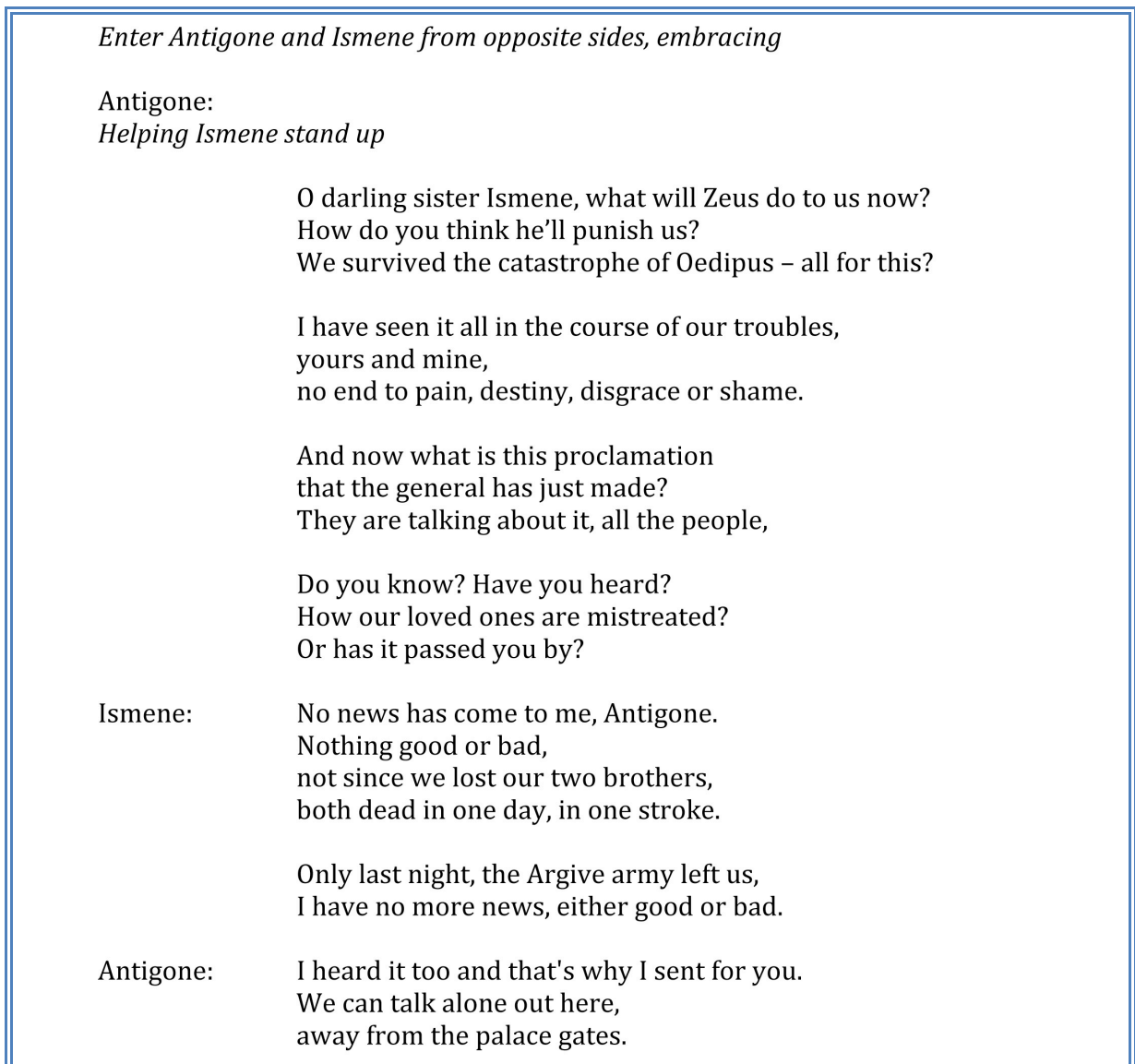


Figure 1: A sample of how the pdf file appears on screen for the actors

Having texts visible on screen is an advantage for the actors but it also has pros and cons for the audience when the screens are placed where they can see them. This may apply to different theatrical layouts but especially where a performance is held *in the round*, where it becomes inescapable. On one hand, many people comment that they can understand a play better by having the experience enhanced by the written text (much in the same way as at the RSC, rows of Japanese school girls watched a performance of *King Lear* with the text open on their knees). On the other, it can be a distraction from the actual playing.