

Futuristic Flamenco Females and Shakespeare's *Caesar*: An Interview With Vinetta Strombergs

Introduction:

I met with Vinetta Strombergs in June of 2003 to discuss her adaptation of Shakespeare's *Caesar*. In 1985, Strombergs marked her directorial debut with an unforgettable all-female version of *Caesar* at Theatre Workshop Productions.¹ Though Strombergs maintained 99% of the classical Shakespearean text, she altered the premise by setting the play in an all-female future. In this futuristic version of *Caesar*, female senators attempt to build a democratic political system and thus eliminate the singular ruler - Caesar. Though Shakespeare's linear plot structure and classical text remain almost intact throughout this adaptation, the battle scenes were eliminated and replaced with elaborate sequences of competitive flamenco dancing.

Strombergs denies that the staging choices of her adaptation intended to make a feminist statement². In the following interview, Strombergs explains that the idea to create an all-female Shakespeare production was initiated by her own desire and the desire of fellow female actors to perform challenging Shakespearean roles, rather than to make a feminist statement. For Strombergs, *Caesar* was the obvious text choice for this all-female production, as it is one of Shakespeare's only plays that lacks referents to gender issues. Rather, Shakespeare's *Caesar* concentrates on issues of political power and violence, which Strombergs believes to be universal themes that resonate regardless of gender, time, or place. Strombergs *Caesar* stresses the importance of staging

¹ The artistic director of Theatre Workshop Productions was the late George Luscombe. The theatre underwent financial difficulty and closed around 1986.

² Conlogue, Ray. "Caesar's director expects 'a lot of flak.'" *Globe and Mail* 22 Feb. 1986: D12.

practises and demonstrates how the simple staging choice of using an all-female cast drastically re-conceptualises Shakespeare words to suit a contemporary reality.

After the completion of her all-female production of *Caesar*, Strombergs continued to work as an actor and a director. She recently directed a variety of Shakespeare adaptations including a clown version of *Measure for Measure* entitled *Tit for Tat* and a multi-cultural rendition of *Pericles*. Strombergs has also done a considerable amount of work in Aboriginal theatre, especially as a director for Native Earth Performing Arts³. Strombergs currently lives in Toronto, Ontario and holds the position of Professional Theatre Coordinator for Theatre Ontario⁴.

Interview With Vinetta Strombergs:

MM: As a director, what attracts you to Shakespeare's plays?

VS: Well, it's the best. It's the best words. The richness of the language. The images. You hear it again and again for people that have worked in Shakespeare. The longer they work with it, the more they discover. It's something that's for a lifetime. It not just for one year in school where you learn three plays and that's that. You keep going back again and again.

And actors verify that. Everytime they redo a part - a great role in Shakespeare - they find that it means different things at different times in their lives and it reflects the context that they are in. There have been so many interpretations of the plays depending on the time frame, the geographical location it is taking place in, and the people that are doing it. It just reveals so much over and over and over again. Every time.

MM: There has been a debate in our Shakespeare office as to what constitutes an adaptation. How would you define a *Shakespearean* adaptation?

VS: I don't think I would because ultimately to me it doesn't matter. What matters to me is that it is communicating with an audience. So therefore whenever I have worked on Shakespeare I look at what is relevant to the audience that I am trying to reach. That can

³ Native Earth Performing Arts is an Aboriginal theatre company located in Toronto.

See <http://webhome.idirect.com/~naterth/>.

⁴ See <http://www.theatreontario.org/>.

be a lot of different things. First and foremost, all the work I have done in Shakespeare has taken place in Canada. In Toronto. So, it depends on what part of the Toronto audience I am trying to reach. Is it a young audience? Is it a middle class audience? Or is it a school show? Because I have done a lot of just straight on Shakespeare in a school context. Trying to bring it to life to people that have never been exposed to it. Actors who are in their first or second year of training and they have never done Shakespeare and they're terrified of it. Well, I totally understand that. I hated it in school. I didn't get it and I didn't want to do that memory work. It was meaningless stuff, weird words, strange sentence construction, and stuff you didn't get.

As an actor talking acting classes and voice classes, it was discovering how that language opens you up emotionally. How you have to be in your body and on your breath to do that work. The amazing immense challenge of the language and making sense of it. How your mind has to work. It has to be so agile to connect all the thoughts in the sequences to make the arguments. It's like being a lawyer. I mean it was just more and more exciting the more I worked on it. And then I went, "How do I now take my experiences and communicate it to an audience that is not used to listening to this stuff? How do they make sense of it?" We just don't have that training anymore that they had in the Elizabethan times. They were good at it. They did it [listened to Shakespeare plays] all the time.

It's actually exciting to me what I see in my limited knowledge of hip-hop and rap. I am really excited to see what is going to come out of that generation of people who work with words in an interesting and dynamic fresh way. You know, how they're going to interpret the stuff? Cause it's that same territory.

I didn't answer the adaptation question at all. I just don't believe in museum theatre. I just don't think you can recreate the way it was originally done. So to some degree it is always an adaptation of the original intent and yet you can be true to the original intent. But, I guess really an adaptation means that you are starting with the words as the source and then you're changing the words. Certainly there is a lot of discussion around when you are translating. It's automatically an adaptation. Or is it? You can't just translate word by word because that doesn't work. So, there is all that stuff. But, if the words are exactly the same, I don't know that it can really be an adaptation. I know that when I've done some of my Shakespeare, it has been experienced completely differently than the usual productions. Even though I don't think of it as an adaptation. I do think that it is quite a different interpretation than...Oh, it's so hard to define! We don't have the words for it.

But, every time you do a show you're interpreting it. But somehow there seems to be another stage when you go further away. Gender is the obvious thing and certainly with *Caesar* we found that. It had a tremendous impact on the women to play it. And we actually had a Jungian psychologist come in, Marianne Woodman. She was just blown away. She said, "Do you know how difficult what you are doing is? To inhabit a male psyche in such a male play?" And it was tough. It had very definite psychological and emotional ramifications for the actresses. But they were just saying the words. *Only one*

word got changed in the whole show. And that was instead of, “This is a man,” it was “This is a Roman.” And that was right near the end over Brutus’ death. And somehow that seems more than just an interpretation, but that is after the fact and after getting lots of feedback from people.

MM: In Canada, there doesn’t seem to be an established national literary canon of classical theatrical works. As a result of this, do you think that the process of adaptation has become essentially endemic in our society?

VS: I think that the notion of adaptation is much more for the writer. Or if you’re switching media, so it’s “adapted for the stage from the novel” or “adapted from the musical for the movie,” which seems to be very popular right now. That “adapted” – fitting into a new context. I don’t know...

MM: What is your background training in theatre and how does this training influence your work with Shakespeare?

VS: My training? I never went formally to a theatre school. I came out of the crazy early seventies in Toronto with alternative theatre. And the theatre that I was associated primarily with was Global Village Theatre, which did a lot of strange dance dramas and new musicals, which were quite successful, but the company only lasted about five years. But it was right in there from seventy to seventy-five with the Tarragon⁵, the Passe Muraille⁶, The Factory Theatre⁷, and The Free Theatre. I also had dance and music background and then the acting was kind of learned on the fly. I had a natural flair for comedy and clown. There weren’t a lot of opportunities in the seventies for training. Then Equity Showcase came to be and they offered classes in a lot of different things. So in the late seventies, I got very serious about learning Shakespeare and voice and movement and connecting all three. And it was through people like David Smuckler – who is the voice guru. Paula Thompson who often worked with him for the movement stuff and Neil Freeman who did the First Folio text approach. It was a good length of time taking classes before I started the *Caesar* project in eighty-four. It was quite a length of time that I had been taking classes in it [Shakespeare]. I was always exploring other stuff, but it came from a strong musical theatre background. And dance and music.

I think Shakespeare was easier to approach because of that. I think when you approach it intellectually or even just seriously, it becomes hard work. But when you can find the music in it, which of course Shakespeare talked about all the time. The villains don’t hear music. The villains don’t sing. It’s missing in their beings. Think of the whole iambic pentameter stuff and then what happens when you break a rhythm – when it lives in your body. Dancers understand that. And musicians understand that. That alarming effect it has when you are shaken up. You understand it emotionally already inside your

⁵ See <http://www.tarragontheatre.com/>.

⁶ See <http://www.passemuraille.on.ca/>.

⁷ See <http://www.factorytheatre.ca/>.

body. I think that was part of the things that started to excite me. So the whole training was a catch as catch can of a whole load of classes in scene study, and voice, and movement, and Shakespeare, and text.

Embodying Shakespeare was so exciting. In voice classes, I remember “big drama”. There were all these people standing around in a circle doing these sounds and the minute you started speaking Shakespeare text you were hysterically laughing and hyperventilating or you were weeping with huge tears. You weren’t acting. You were just saying words. Openly in your body and breathing it. And it had this extraordinary effect on you. And you know you work through that and eventually you get over it. But it’s an extraordinary feeling.

MM: I’d like to take a closer look at *Caesar* and ask a few questions about its development and meaning. As the adapter of *Caesar*, how was this production ideologically and stylistic your own?

VS: I worked on it for such a long time. Originally the production was created so that I could have a chance to perform. The more I worked on it – the more I couldn’t let go of my ideas. I had to own the production as a director. I did not want to be in it. And also when I auditioned, I saw over two hundred women and I just went, “You know what? They’re better than I am. And I would just rather direct this thing.” And that was kind of the beginning of my director career.

So, as I was working through the ideas... I went back to the text and it was all about finding what the imagery in the text was, what the words were saying, and what the rhythms were saying, and then how? And then the problem and the challenge: how to justify the choices that I was making, which was to do it with women?

The original goal was going to be that it was all going to be women except the person playing Caesar and that role was going to be given to a man. And so everybody got on this feminist notion, you know, “the women kill the man” and all this stuff. And I just thought, “You know what? That’s not why I want to do this. It’s not to make that kind of political statement. It was more about celebrating the talent of the women and then making sure that it was accurate to what was actually in the play. And I thought you could do it. You could justify that if there was a world where there were no men, then women would do it all. Could they actually go through this? Well, all those thoughts didn’t come from anyone else. It was my studying the text. My thinking about the story. So, I had to own it. So, that’s why it is mine. And as a director you talk other people into doing it, but I tell you it was so easy. Those women were so excited to do it. But, it was hard. It was really hard.

The difficult scenes were things like the battle scenes. And I always hated those tedious battle scenes on stage because you can’t do them on stage, unless you have extraordinarily trained fighting people, then you can’t actually do justice to battle scenes the way you can on film. So, I went, “Oh man, I do not want to do bad battle scenes.” So what would be a metaphor in a female context? And then I saw the flamenco *Carmen*

by this flamenco company in Spain and it made me crazy. And I went, “That’s it. That is it. That is so feminine and it is so powerful and it’s so strong.” And again it’s the rhythm and that worked a treat. Everybody responded to that.

MM: Could you describe the flamenco battle scenes?

VS: They were purely metaphorical. They were set up as encounters. You would have a rhythm set up coming in from one side of the stage and then it would answer from the other side. I mean these people were coming from the same background so it made sense that they speak the same language. They just disagree. So, it was like one-up manship. You could liken it to *West Side Story* and the dance in the gym. This is the way these people do it and this is the way these people do it. Well, that is a cultural difference, but they were still dancing and trying to outdo each other.

MM: How was the dancing symbolic of violence?

VS: It really wasn’t. The only violent act was the stabbing. For the battle scenes, we would joke and say, “dance to death”. Die from exhaustion. Because you didn’t really need to see the deaths. But, you had the suicides – Brutus’. But those just weren’t the important parts. It was more about the struggle. It is the same thing when you do romance. It’s not all that important to see all the kissing. It’s the desire to kiss. So, in the battle scenes you want to see the tension and the conflict rather than just the death. Also, I was going for what was theatrical as opposed to what was realistic. So there was no attempt to make it look like a real thing. You could tell who won the battle by who scurried off. An occasionally, I’m sure we must have left people on the floor, but I can’t remember. Because then it was always a problem to getting rid of them and they were playing multiple characters. There were thirteen in the company.

The theatricality of the stabbing of Caesar I really liked. And that was actually the central image I worked from. It was like one of those things that come to you in a dream and you go, “Oh yeah that’s how it is going to work.” Cause again I thought, “Oh man do we have to deal with blood? It’s so messy. And how are we going to clean the costumes if we get blood all over them?” Because we had these amazing costumes. Malibar was one of our sponsors and they gave us all this stuff to use as raw material, which our designer then recombined. It looked totally amazing. Caesar’s outfit was built. And it was like a quilted gold lame jacket, which was spacy and stuff. And it had little pockets with tabs, so that when the first stabbing took place in very slow motion from behind. Casca was up behind on a step and stabbed down and it went into slow motion with a very brilliant white light and this sound effect that just sort of froze everything in air. And it was slow slow slow slow coming down. And then she [Casca] would pull a tab that you didn’t notice in the costume. But when it pulled out, it was red silk. So you had this huge shard of red silk. And then as soon as that came out everyone went into stabbing and just went for these tabs and started pulling them out, so it was just red silk coming out all over. And then when they had to do the bloody hands, you know Caesar is lying there and there was a pocket inside her coat, but it was all covered because they were standing all around her. And they pulled out gynaecological gloves.

So there was this icky female thing of the medical gloves all painted brilliant red. It had a stronger impact than trying to do all the goofy blood stuff.

Did the production refute gender stereotypes associated with power, violence, and the female body?

VS: I was really clear from the very beginning that I didn't want them impersonating men. And it was an interesting challenge for that reason. The material kept driving you towards this very male thing. There was psychic conflict with it. And we had a lot of discussion around it. We discussed how women don't operate that way. The natural female way is the circle as opposed to the male way, which is the more linear. So we kept trying to incorporate that circular thing. And it was the same in the flamenco. It would circle. It came in straight on and then it would circle and then break into smaller circles.

There seems to be something that supports gender differences and therefore if there is a difference there is going to be stereotypes. That isn't going to be true across the board, but ... With the play what we tried to take on was: why do all these senators go against Caesar? Why does his best friend go against him? Because he wanted to be king rather than staying with the form of being all together. So in fact, we defined the female Caesar as breaking away from the female way and becoming the male way of wanting to be the single ruler instead of the group power. And so all our choices were done that way. Again it was about redefining it so that the women could own it, so that they could understand it. There was a lot of that. When you create this fictional world that we don't know exist, you have to do a lot of background to layer it in and to put it in the future, but ultimately it worked.

It was important also that they were wearing dresses largely. And the flamenco really added to that. That there was a very feminine look to it – with Elizabethan collars and beautiful fabrics. And there were only a few women that wore pants in it or wore pantaloon type pants, which were even more feminine somehow.

MM: Was the plot linear?

VS: Yes, it was exactly as written. There is a character of a fool or a jester that we cut. There were those minimal cuts in the text. The only word changed was "man" to "Roman." The rest was absolutely regular text. The challenge for the women was owning the text and it was hard for them.

MM: What took focus – the futuristic design or the Shakesperean language? Did these two elements clash at all?

VS: No, not at all. I think in the same way *Star Trek* uses a lot of very classically trained actors and often quotes Shakespeare. Christopher Plummer did it. He did part of the *Hamlet* "to be or not to be." What is he? A Romulan? You know?

I think there is an association between futuristic things and very old things. I think it is harder to be in contemporary clothes and do Shakespeare than it is to be in exotic costumes of any sort. It seems to work.

MM: In the article, “*Caesar’s* director’s expects ‘a lot of flak’,” Ray Conlogue quotes you saying, “I’m not making a feminist statement.” Reflecting back, do you think that *Caesar* was more political than you originally intended it to be?

VS: Well, yeah. But, so what? You put your work out there. You do what you need to do to say what you have to say. I wanted to work on Shakespeare and I thought that this was a play that gender didn’t matter. So therefore I didn’t want to engage in the discussion of gender. I just wanted people to come and see the play. Did they get the story? Did they understand the characters? Did they get the conflict? And that worked a treat.

I loved watching people in intermission in the lobby talking about the show. And nobody was having arguments about, “Why are women doing this?” They were talking about the play. Or specific characters and what the characters were doing. And I went, “That’s great.” That to me was the success of it.

Yeah, it looked pretty spectacular too. That’s just frills and frippery – that’s fun! No, people didn’t waste too much time talking about that [gender]. And certainly the flamenco had a huge impact on people. They loved it and really responded to it.

MM: Where was the show produced?

It was only produced in one place – Toronto Workshop Productions, which is now Buddies in Bad Times Theatre⁸. 12 Alexander Street. That was the only space we did it in.

MM: How did the space affect the meaning? Was it still considered a new theatre at this time?

VS: No, it was pretty close to the end of TWP. They closed down at the end of that season or the next. They were in huge financial difficulties at the time. George Luscombe [the artistic director] was hugely supportive of the project. He was great. We were going to be rehearsing in the regular rehearsal space, which was the Elm Street Arts and Letters Club. They lost that space because they couldn’t afford it anymore. But he also had to close the show before ours, so we actually got to rehearse in the theatre for five weeks, which was astonishing. There were days when there was no heat and it was winter and that was tough, but to actually work in the space you’re going to be performing in. It’s like a dream come true.

And it was almost like a Stratford amphitheatre. It wasn’t quite 180 degrees, but the configuration was very much that thrust. And the stairs coming down! It felt like the

⁸ See <http://www.buddiesinbadtimes theatre.com/>.

senate. We used the stairways, entrances, and exits through it and included the audience, so that the audience was part of the spectators within the story. So when you get the big speech of Mark Antony's – the reporters, the so-called reporters that were flinging questions were in the house, so there was a very inclusive feeling. It was a great relationship between performer and audience in that space and I loved that. So the space informed choices of staging. Absolutely.

MM: Are there plans to restage *Caesar*?

VS: I would love to do it again! But I am not willing to go through the headache of producing it. Too hard. It's really hard.

MM: Right now are you working on any Shakespeare projects?

VS: Actually, the *Tit For Tat* or *Measure for Measure*. I am really looking at adapting that into a musical. So then the question would be: do you stay with the language and just incorporate music or do you change it completely? So that is just something that is in the beginning stages right now and I have to talk to a number of people. I know that there are other people that have that project, but I don't know what's happening with it. There's a Club Lafayette adaptation of *Measure for Measure*. It was work-shopped by Paula Wing and Ted Dykstra, but I don't know what has happened to that project.

I like *Measure for Measure*. I like the so called "problem plays." Because you go, "Wait a minute, it wasn't a problem for Shakespeare, so why is it a problem for us? Why don't we get it?" There mustn't be a problem because he writes so well for it to be a problem. So it's just finding a hook that gets you in and then you have to play. Always go back to the text and find the stuff that turns you on and then charge on through.

MM: You did a clown version of *Measure for Measure*. Could you describe that production?

VS: Yes, it was a ton of fun. It was a park training project and workshop project. It was very rough and ready. It was in collaboration with Theatre Resource Centre, which gave clown workshops. And so that was what we did – it was eleven actors and over an eleven-month period they got clown training. Plus, we worked gradually on the text aspects one-on-one and then gradually brought it into scene work. There was a two week rehearsal at the end and then we did it. And everybody literally created their own costumes out of the big bin of stuff and they made it up. And we went for Roco Baroco clowns. It was quite outrageous looking. Slightly white faced, but it was set in Louis XIV's. Literally, I just went through art books and I went, "Okay what is the period that is the most ridiculous? The most fru-fru? The most over the top?" And so that was what I picked because it was totally decadent and to me that's the core of what's going on in *Measure for Measure*. It's about decadence and who gets away with what.

Originally, I wanted to do *Measure for Measure* when the whole Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings happened in the States. It was a huge sexual harassment thing. Judge

Clarence Thomas was going to be put in as one of the Supreme-Court Justices and suddenly Anita Hill who had been his assistant in the political office complained that he had harassed her sexually. And then suddenly there was this huge hearing with all these senators sitting around and vilifying her as misinterpreting him and it became this huge case that was on all of the American stations. And watching that I went, "Is that like Isabella having to say I went to Angelo and he did this to me." And then I thought, "Well how the hell can this smart man be so stupid? He's running the country – why?"

And again it was that thing – go back to the text and read it. What is he saying? What is the moment where it changes? And I looked at Angelo's speech after he meets with Isabella and what does he say the minute Isabella walks out of the room? He goes, "What's this? What's this? Is it her or is it me? Who's sin is more?" and that kind of a speech. But it was, "What's this? What's this?" And I went, "What going on?" And I went, (*Vinetta drums her fingers on the table contemplatively*). He's gotten turned on. He's got the biggest erection of his life and he doesn't understand what's happening to him and it completely changed him. So what makes a man go berserk? When does the dick start thinking and the brain stop? Girls fall in love they put their brain on the shelf and off they go. So it's that same thing from a male perspective. All right, that would mean Angelo has no experience with sex because to do what he now goes on to do is quite outrageous. And yet at a certain point when he's about to rape her he stops. Why does he stop? So I went, "Okay it's got to be someone who's completely sexually inexperienced." So that means he's younger, rather than older and maybe a bit of a nerd type.

So, who's doing the manipulating? The Duke is manipulating. So why doesn't he pick Escalus to run the country while he's off spying on everybody? Why does he pick Angelo? Oh well, because the guy [Angelo] is a rubber-stamper civil servant. He's not going to ask questions and he's not going to cause problems. Right perfect! So it all went down like that and then as I had worked out that logic, it was Isabella. All right, so she's a nun. Well, no she's not a nun yet. She's actually probably living a very secluded life because Dad died and now she's got this brother who's carrying on and making women pregnant. But, she's kind of cocooned in this place. She's naïve, so she doesn't know that she has big tits and is very attractive. And because Dad died she has to go to the convent because that is what good girls do.

So again, it was working through a logic that was all based on sexuality. It was reading, "What's in the words? What is in the words?" So suddenly you start realising there's all this stuff about whips and flagellation for the priest. The language itself is very decadent and very sexual. And of course there was a lot of that in Shakespeare all over the place. There was a certain sort of degenerative thing going on, I felt. So I defined all the characters I wanted to use, which was the eleven characters, in terms of sexuality and power politics. Well, this was a much more political piece that I wanted to do [compared to *Caesar*]. Then I started doing gender-switching. So Lucius was the woman that was trying to pass as a man. Escalus was the older woman who was no longer considered sexual and therefore has no power. Marianna was also the "bod". She was the strumpet.

It was a guy in drag who was doing it with the Duke. So, the Duke was just decadent. He just wanted sex in any which way – the weirder the better.

So, it was really looking at everything through sexuality. And I think that's in the play. I think that's totally the heart of the play. And so it was fun doing that. And then I thought, "Oh, people are just going to go nuts." So I went, "Clown! That'll be the answer." Clown you can get away with all that stuff because that's the essence of those clown things. They're in your face with one thing, but really it's fun too. So we did a lot of exploration. What kind of clown was it going to be? Was it going to be red nosed clown? Was it going to be more silly or was it going to be Joey and Auguste? Or was it going to be the bouffon? So we actually took bits and pieces of everything and then just put it out there. And I thought it worked great. And I loved it so much that I want to try it as musical.

MM: Would you incorporate the clown style into the musical?

VS: I really like clown for a lot of things. We have such wonderful clown companies in Toronto who have all gone over and studied with O'Coq or Golier and then come back and made it their own. So, you look at the difference between what companies like Mump and Smoot⁹ are doing and what Theatre Columbus does. There is a huge range of possibilities. Or what Dean Gilmour¹⁰ does. There are wonderful things to be done, so clown is not just necessarily silly. But, I think it provides a freedom for the actor to do outrageous things and get away with them. It's a sense of play that I love and an incredible honesty.

MM: You've also done a multi-cultural adaptation of *Pericles*.

VS: That was more of a training project than a real production. It was bringing together a bunch of young actors from different backgrounds and just exploring the text to see. In fact, I had done a lot of work with Native theatre and development work in that area both with actors and with scripts. And a dear friend of mine had commented – she was actually working at U of T at the time – and had asked me to come in and do the Shakespeare stuff. She had just said, "Cause I just don't get it. It just goes against my natural rhythms." And this was a woman who was a fabulous actress and I was so surprised. We started talking and it was something that a lot of First Nations languages and the drumming stuff – it's totally opposite of iambic pentameter in terms of where the beat goes. I went, "Jeez are there cultural differences in the reading of Shakespeare? How would different people do it?" And so it was my own little research thing to bring in some Asian actors, and Native actors, and there were Black actors, but they were from all over the place. And they were all Canadian.

So it was interesting to tap them and to ask them to go into whatever heritage they had connected to. And some of them were pretty disconnected. So it was a double challenge

⁹ See <http://www.mumpandsmoot.com/>.

¹⁰ Dean Gilmour is the co-creator of the clown company named Theatre Smith-Gilmour. See <http://www.go7.ca/theatresmithgilmour.html>.

for them to go, “Okay, how does this fit into my context and how do I deal with Shakespeare! He’s so tough.” But, it was fun. And again there were elements of clown brought in. We worked on text, we worked on movement, we worked on rhythm, we worked on mask. Neutral mask particularly. And it was a really good exploration. And then feeding it all in.

I think with Shakespeare, you really have to bring your own stuff to it. You don’t just want to be directed: stand there, say it this way, and move there. It’s way more fun when you can inhabit it in your own way. And so to do that I think you want to have some other training - not just isolated Shakespeare acting. I guess there are some parts you have to do. It’s interesting. There are a number of teachings of Shakespeare that I find fascinating where it frees an actor. And sometimes I find it is just better that they do whatever... sometimes you can get too locked in to the intellectual approach to it. I mean yes, you have to have a feeling for the rhythm and the poetry. And you have to make sense of it, but you can get too strict about that and you can lock people down. And then it just feels wooden and artificial. But when they can really live through it, it’s fun.

MM: Do you think Canadians have their own rhythm when speaking Shakespeare?

VS: I think it’s more that some people have a way with rhythm and some people don’t. Some people can tap dance and some people can’t. Some people can sing and some people shouldn’t! No, I actually think everybody should sing. That was flip. But there’s a difference between a real singer – someone that lives in the song as opposed to someone that can hit the notes. And so there is a certain amount you can learn, but...it’s like not everyone can do comedy. You have to have that identification. So, I wouldn’t want to segment Canadians.

But it was interesting, David Smuckler talked about how the language changes going across the country. Going from east to west. How the jaw relaxes. In the east, you get a lot more uptight jaws. And the same thing south to north. So that alone is going to inform how you use the language. The east coast and Newfoundland, in fact, apparently speak closer to a lot of the original Elizabethan English of the lower class. So, you go, “Oh, isn’t that interesting?” So, is it about how it sounds that’s Canadian? Or how we interpret it? Or what makes it ours? I don’t worry about that. I just say I want to do it.

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