

# Measure for Measure

by William Shakespeare

A collaboration between the National Theatre and **Complicite**  
Directed by Simon McBurney

BACKGROUND PACK



Just after the  
heavily from point to point.  
he to witness of each individual without  
Dramatic moments.  
The Show ... (Car by law?)

## Measure for Measure Background Pack

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#### **Measure for Measure** by William Shakespeare

A collaboration between the National Theatre and Complicite

**Further production details:**  
[www.nationaltheatre.org.uk](http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk)

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### Introduction

Complicite's rehearsal process is a journey of constant experimentation. Simon McBurney did not bring a formulated idea of what he was going to do with *Measure for Measure*.

*'...perhaps I should...think of the pattern of Measure for Measure as chaotic. Chaos as we now know is full of patterns. Fractal patterns. They are patterns we cannot predict. Fractals and chaos tell us about the inherent value of living in a world that springs beyond our control. The only thing that matters in the face of the unknowable is how we accept it and live with it. In Measure for Measure, Shakespeare appears to accept the unknowable. It is one of the subjects that inform it.'*

Simon McBurney

This workpack does not explain the 'method' of creating this production. There is no Complicite 'method', nor was there a clear linear route through rehearsals; rather, a chaotic process of exploration. Rehearsals unearthed many different ways of representing one particular scene or a character on stage. One small discovery could trigger a whole new avenue of investigation, which in turn would be abandoned at a later date. Moments of inspiration only come from profound preparation. A huge body of work was amassed during the eight-week rehearsal period and was sifted through in the last few weeks, to create a clear dynamic and cohesive production. Only

Simon McBurney in rehearsal  
photo Sarah Ainslie



through this process could one of Shakespeare's most difficult and ambiguous plays begin to reveal itself and take shape. The first performance was more a point of departure than arrival and, even now, not all the answers have been resolved. New discoveries are still being made with each performance.

The exercises described here illustrate some of the ways in which the company worked in rehearsals. They are not exhaustive, nor do they form a fixed system of work. They should be read as examples of initial ideas, inspiring you to find your own ways of interpreting the play and approaching Shakespeare, or indeed any text. This pack is meant to throw the onus back onto the imaginative life of the reader, the performer, teacher or director.

### Synopsis

The Duke, Vincentio, absents himself from Vienna, instructing his pious deputy, Angelo, to rule in his place. Angelo, sickened by the depravity he sees around him, promptly revives old laws against sexual immorality.

The first to be sentenced is Claudio, a young man whose fiancée, Juliet, is pregnant ahead of the wedding. He is condemned to death and his sister, Isabella, goes to Angelo to beg for Claudio's life. Angelo agrees to free Claudio if she will give herself to him. Isabella, who is about to become a nun, is horrified. She tells the imprisoned Claudio what has been demanded of her, and Claudio entreats her to do as Angelo asks.

The Duke has remained in Vienna throughout, disguised as a friar, and has been secretly observing how Angelo rules. He persuades Isabella to pretend to consent to Angelo – her place in bed to be taken in the dark by Mariana, who had been betrothed to Angelo but deserted by him. Despite his promise, and believing he has seduced Isabella, Angelo persists in his plan to execute her brother.

The Duke emerges from his disguise to reveal his knowledge of Angelo's deception...

## THE PLAY

### Approaching the text

*'We do not understand Shakespeare from a single reading, and certainly not from a single play. There is a relation between the various plays of Shakespeare, taken in order; and it is a work of years to venture even one individual interpretation of the pattern in Shakespeare's carpet. It is not certain that Shakespeare himself knew what it was.'*

T S Eliot, from his essay on Dante (1929)

*'When you read a play like Measure for Measure, the first thing that happens is you come away with a series of questions beginning with Why? Why does the Duke leave his kingdom? Why does he come back in disguise? But this is an intellectual response, from reading the play. What is strange is that the moment the text enters the mouths of actors, those questions disappear and a whole new set emerges, each beginning with How? How can you make it believable that no-one recognises the Duke?'*

*The play provokes more questions than it answers... For some it is a play of tests, or a play of judgments; for others it is all about the relation between divine and secular law; yet more see it as a play about sex and punishment. In rehearsal one thing is clear above all. When it is 'stood up' it works. The meaning is revealed in the body... All questions must be reduced to one question. Not what does it mean, but how*

The Measure for Measure  
company in rehearsal  
photo Sarah Ainslie



*does it come alive? The only way to approach Shakespeare is to come without any answers.'*  
Simon McBurney

## UNDERSTANDING THE WORDS, RHYTHM AND ARCHITECTURE

### The words

The words in Shakespeare are all we have. The words themselves can often tell us how a line should be said if we trust and listen to it. We have to allow ourselves to be inhabited by the words before we can make any decisions about what they mean and how to say them. Trusting the text allows an openness to the first experience of reading the text in a physical space.

Simon McBurney introduced the following exercise at the very beginning of rehearsals:

### Exercise

Mark two lines on the floor - one upstage from stage right to left and one much further downstage from stage left to right.

Start from the very beginning of the play – Act 1 Scene 1.

The actors in the scene stand just behind the upstage line ready to start the scene. To start the scene, those characters marked in the text walk towards the downstage line and deliver their lines directly out to the front, as if to an audience, not to each other. The group of actors should include all the non-speaking parts as well – the attendants, lords and servants.

The actors who are not involved in this scene are used as the audience.

As each scene ends, the actors in the following scene make their way to the downstage line as the previous group is leaving. Notice that you will rarely find an actor in the end of a scene who is needed for the proceeding scene.

Make sure there is no gap between speaking the last line of the previous scene and the first line of the next scene. Shakespeare's plays have fluidity to them: the theatres they were first staged on had minimal props and little set, so scenes followed on from each other in quick succession.

This exercise not only triggered further exploration of words - reading the scenes through without acting allows the text itself to be heard - but also helped reveal the inherent rhythm, timeframe and architecture of the play. This led to the development of two major stylistic motifs in the production; the first being scenes following each other in rapid succession (as the last word of one scene is said, the first word of the following scene is said straight afterwards); the second motif being that the actors often face out directly to the audience, even when speaking to characters directly behind them.

- Try doing this and see what effect this non-naturalistic device has on the actors themselves and on the audience.
- Notice how many people are on stage at any one time. This gives an idea of whether the scene is public or private and helps us to understand the text.

For example, the language of the Duke in the opening scene is practically impenetrable. The number of people on stage implies that this is a public scene, and so we can begin to understand why the language is so impenetrable: it is formal political language.

- Look at the difference in Angelo's language between Act 2 scene 1, Act 2 scene 2, and Act

David Troughton,  
as Duke Vincentio  
photo Neil Libbert



2 scene 4. What is the difference? Who is present?

The language of these latter scenes becomes less formal, more secretive. There is a difference between how people act in public and how they act in private, illustrating the concept of 'seeming and being'. This is a fundamental motif of *Measure for Measure*, and an idea explored by Shakespeare in many of his plays. (This is explored further on page 9).

### Time

Time is difficult to define as there are a number of inconsistencies in Shakespeare's text. Shakespeare works with a double sense of time – literal time, as referred to in the text, and sensual time, the time that the audience experiences – and the two can be very different. We notice, by doing the initial exercise, how long scenes are and that there are numerous entrances and exits onto or off the stage. This engenders a sense of incredible movement of characters from one place to another, and signals a sense of chaos and disruption, until the last act, when the threads of the play are brought together.

### Consider or discuss

- Which characters remain on stage for substantial periods of time?
- Why does Angelo disappear from the stage for a long period after Act 2?
- In Acts 3 and 4, the busiest of all, why is the Duke the only character who remains on stage almost continuously?

**Research and discuss - exercise to reveal literal time**

Chart out the timeframes in the play from the references in the text.

- Over what period of time does the play happen? (Days, weeks or months?)
- When do things happen – during the day or at night?
- At what times has Shakespeare placed particular scenes?
- If the play takes place over a short period of time, what does this convey – a sense of speed and chaos?
- If you interpret the play happening over a long period of time, what difference would this make to the sensation of the play?

Now incorporate where each scene takes place into the chart.

- Note that although the play is set in the city of Vienna, there are very few specific settings detailed in the first folio text of 1623 (we mostly worked with texts based on the first folio in rehearsals).

Sometimes there are no references to location, but it is possible to get a sense of where each scene takes place.

- What kind of spaces does the play happen in?
- What atmospheres do these places convey?
- Why does Shakespeare juxtapose a courtly

environment immediately with a seedy underground whorehouse?

- Why is a whorehouse immediately followed by two religious places?
- What is the effect of moving from one atmosphere to the other and what is Shakespeare telling us by doing this?
- Is the nature of the play clandestine or open?

By looking at the number of pages each scene lasts, where each scene takes place and what kind of place that is, we can begin to understand the overall structure of the play in terms of physical time and place.

These enquiries enable us to consider the inherent architecture of the text and form an opinion of the play. In so doing, we can also start to consider the physical practicalities of staging the play in terms of set, lighting and projections.

Throughout the rehearsal process we experiment with the following questions:

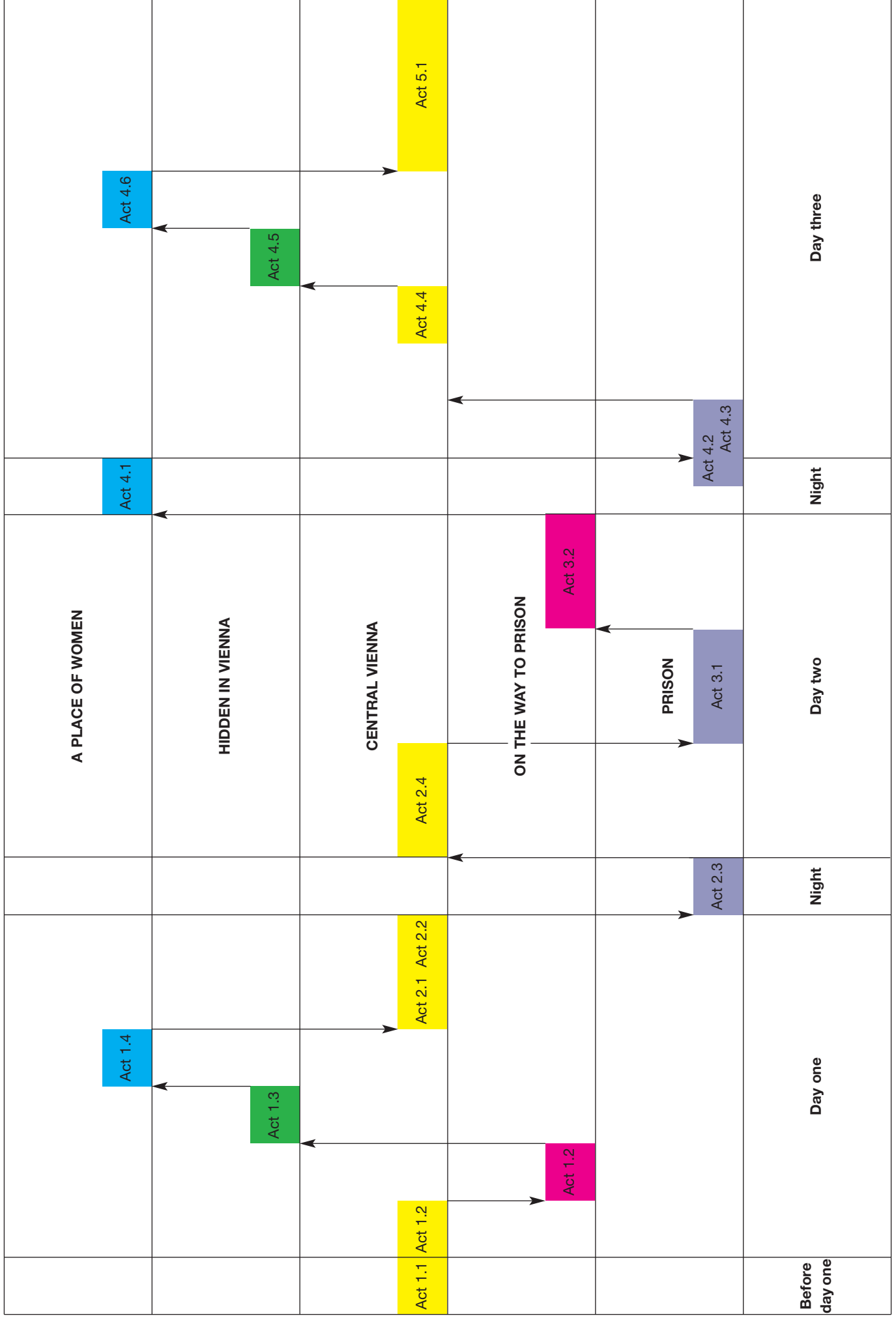
- How many environments are there?
- How can we move easily from one environment to the other?
- Should lots of set be used to show these environments or can we create the spaces less literally, and more metaphorically?
- If so, how might we achieve this?
- What other non-set elements can we use to define space?
- How might we create the environments of the play just with bodies in space?

In this production, Simon McBurney creates an ahistoric, universal world, a non-specific contemporary setting with a sense of modernity that is immediately comprehensible to an audience. This allows for a simple unified sense of design that enables the play itself to breathe. If the historical time is restricted, the ambiguity of the text is also restricted and the humanity of the play can be limited.

Paul Rhys, Vinnie Robinson and Meredith MacNeill in rehearsal

photo: Johannes Flaschberger





## UNDERSTANDING THE CHARACTERS AND REFERENCES

### Names

Although *Measure for Measure* is set in Vienna, none of the characters have Austrian names. The Duke is called Vincentio and even though his name is never referred to in the text, Shakespeare has clearly given the Duke this name for a particular reason. Vincentio may come from the Latin word *vinco vincere vici victum* [to conquer, overcome, master, surpass; to prove successfully, win one's point].

It is interesting to consider other characters and references in the play itself within this context:

Lucio, 'the fantastical', comes from the word *lucis* in Latin meaning light. Lucifer is known as the light bearer and we cannot ignore the connotation. To Shakespeare's contemporary audience 'light' also meant sexually immoral.

Angelo comes from the word Angel, meaning the divine messenger of god.

Isabella means 'the beautiful'.

Abhorson is close to the English word abhorrent and also meant 'whore's son'.

Escalus means 'the ladder' in Latin.

Shakespeare and his audiences would have known the morality and mystery plays of the period. The characters in morality plays were

personifications of good and evil involved in a struggle for man's soul; the protagonist was subjected to temptations and obliged to choose a godly life over evil and then validate its virtues. Central characters in many of Shakespeare's plays are subjected to temptation through external characters. Othello is tempted by Iago, Macbeth by Lady Macbeth, Brutus by Cassio and Angelo is tempted by Isabella in *Measure for Measure*. We cannot ignore that a 17th-century audience would have made strong associations between the characters in *Measure for Measure* and their biblical and morality play counterparts. Vincentio could be seen as God, Angelo as his messenger and Escalus, the ladder, is the connection between the two. Lucio becomes Lucifer, Isabella, the Virgin Mary and Mariana, Mary Magdalene. This offers yet another layer of meaning to the text.

### Debate

The other distinct quality of the morality plays was debate. *Measure for Measure* is a difficult play, a dark comedy that provokes more questions than it actually answers. It is difficult for those in power to decide between the contradictory claims of mercy and justice when confronted with the specific, complex human situation that is central to the play. The title is taken from St. Matthew's biblical account of the Sermon on the Mount.

"With what measure ye mete,  
It shall be measured to you again."

### Consider or discuss

What does this tell us about the play and its exploration of justice and mercy?

What is Shakespeare doing by using these references?

Is there such a thing as clearly defined good and evil, right and wrong in *Measure for Measure*?

What is the message in *Measure for Measure*?

'Measure for Measure is a play about tests. When you are tested you discover things about yourself you did not know before...[The play] tests readers, directors and audiences. Should Isabella have yielded to Angelo to save her brother's life? Is the Duke's manipulation of

Ben Meyjes and  
Naomi Frederick in rehearsal  
photo Sarah Ainslie



*other people's lives and sufferings justified? Should he let Mariana marry the murderous Angelo?... These and other questions the play raises are unanswerable – that is, they provoke endless debate. But by debating them you come to know yourself and others...'*

John Carey, Merton Professor of Poetry, Merton College, Oxford

### **Seeming and being**

#### **Consider and discuss**

Look at the movement between prose and verse and the quality of language that characters use.

- How does this help us understand a scene and a character?
- Why does the Duke consistently move from verse to prose and from one type of language to another?
- Why does Angelo rarely speak in prose and when he does, why does he?
- When are characters silent and why are they silent?

This is another way to understand the distinct difference between the public and private world of the play. As we discovered earlier, there is a difference between the way people act in public and the way they act in private, and this illustrates the concept of seeming and being, a fundamental motif of the play.

Naomi Frederick (Isabella) and Paul Rhys (Angelo)  
photo Neil Libbert



Isabella “Ha! Little honour to be much believed,  
And most pernicious pernicious purpose.  
Seeming, seeming.  
I will proclaim thee, Angelo, look for't.  
Sign me a present pardon for my brother,  
Or with an outstretched throat I'll tell the world  
aloud what man thou art.”  
Act 2 scene 4

Many of the characters are playing roles, trying to appear better or different to the world around them. There is often a distinct difference between the way the world sees a character and how the character sees themselves. This type of enquiry helps us to begin to understand the journey of the characters.

How do we start to think about building a character in rehearsal? We have already touched upon some aspects of the characters by looking at the quality of the language they use and how they behave in private and in public. To develop this further we look at the clues the text gives us from which to formulate our own opinions of the characters. Yet again we only have Shakespeare's words on which to rely.

#### **Research**

Look through the text and make a separate list of a) what the character says about themselves, and b) what other people say about them. You can apply this to all of the characters but it is particularly useful for the major characters. This is a useful exercise that can be applied to any text.

## THE REHEARSAL PROCESS

### Preparing a company of actors

During every morning of the eight-week rehearsal period, Simon McBurney led the company through a variety of exercises exploring space, the language of movement, the development of an emotional language and the cohesion of an ensemble.

This type of work is at the very core of Complicite's work, enabling collaboration and the development of both the actor's individual sensitivity and a shared physical and emotional vocabulary within the company.

What is particular to *Measure for Measure* is how this work was applied to Shakespeare's text. Many of these daily exercises affected the way a particular scene was approached in rehearsal. For example, Simon looked at a number of different ways of placing bodies in space to see what kind of place and mood could be created and what story this told. Often the actors were split into groups to explore these very issues themselves and then they would show their work to each other. Elsewhere the exploration of tension played a particularly important role in the way the actors approached speaking the text.

Meredith MacNeill and  
Naomi Frederick in rehearsal  
photo Sarah Ainslie



### Tension

The very nature of our personalities and the way we engage with the world around us has a natural level of tension. At any point in our daily lives we hold a certain level of tension in our bodies. When we are asleep there is very little tension, but to get out of bed and make a cup of tea we physically must have more tension in our bodies to be able to stand up and move around, although we may still be very relaxed. On a packed train or tube on a hot day we may be fraught and eager to get to our destination, and the level of tension builds up as we attempt to get from A to B in the most efficient and economical way. Tension builds up in our bodies when we are angry or frustrated. The most extreme state of tension is when there is so much tension in our body that we can't physically move.

### Exercise

Begin by exploring both ends of the scale so that you know the extremes within which you are working.

Work in pairs. One at a time, take all the tension out of your body (you should end up lying on the floor). Your partner should check that there is no tension left in your body. This is tension level 1.

In the same pairs, try the opposite: make every sinew and muscle in the body tense. This is hard work so don't hold this tension for more than a few seconds at a time. This is level 7.

Now explore the scale from 1 to 7, observing the changes that occur from stage to stage. Move around the space, gradually injecting more tension into your body. Play around, interacting with one another and with different levels of tension. Try to find real life examples that illustrate each of the different levels of tension. This is a list of names given to each level of tension:

1. Catatonic
2. Relaxed
3. Economic
4. Alert
5. Suspense
6. Passionate
7. Tragic

An exploration of these levels not only gives us an awareness of the body but also enables us to develop an emotional vocabulary. \*

- What happens when you make every muscle in your body tense?
- How does this make you feel?
- When you are completely relaxed how does this make you feel?

Tension in our body evokes emotion.

Shakespearean plays are almost operatic in their demands on the actor: emotions run high. We rarely experience these higher levels of tension in our daily lives, but by exploring this upper range we can begin to recognise what these emotions feel like truthfully and how they affect our bodies. Through a regular exploration of these levels, an actor is able to access these emotions with ease because they have become familiar with the feeling. This process of working externally can develop the mind and body further than intellectual exploration can. In rehearsals we often explored the text using this vocabulary.

#### **Consider and explore**

Look at the following scene and explore the text using the individual level of tension identified for each line. What happens?

**CLAUDIO (relaxed)**

Now, sister, what's the comfort?

**ISABELLA (economic)**

Why,

As all comforts are: most good, most good indeed.

Lord Angelo, having affairs to heaven,  
Intends you for his swift ambassador,  
Where you shall be an everlasting leiger.  
Therefore your best appointment make with speed;  
Tomorrow you set on.

**CLAUDIO (economic)**

Is there no remedy?

**ISABELLA (economic)**

None, but such remedy as, to save a head,  
To cleave a heart in twain.

**CLAUDIO (alert)**

But is there any?

**ISABELLA (economic)**

Yes, brother, you may live:  
There is a devilish mercy in the judge,  
If you'll implore it, that will free your life,  
But fetter you till death.

**CLAUDIO (suspense)**

Perpetual durance?

**ISABELLA (economic)**

Ay, just. Perpetual durance, a restraint,  
Though all the world's vastidity you had,  
To a determined scope.

**CLAUDIO (suspense)**

But in what nature?

**ISABELLA (economic)**

In such a one as, you consenting to't,  
Would bark your honour from that trunk you bear,  
And leave you naked.

**CLAUDIO (passionate)**

Let me know the point.

**ISABELLA (suspense)**

O, I do fear thee, Claudio; and I quake  
Lest thou a feverous life shouldst entertain,  
And six or seven winters more respect  
Than a perpetual honour. Darist thou die?

**(alert)**

The sense of death is most in apprehension,  
And the poor beetle that we tread upon,  
In corporal sufferance finds a pang as great  
As when a giant dies.

Paul Rhys (Angelo)  
photo Neil Libbert



**CLAUDIO (relaxed)**

Why give you me this shame?  
Think you I can a resolution fetch  
From flowery tenderness? If I must die,  
I will encounter darkness as a bride,  
And hug it in mine arms.

**ISABELLA (passionate)**

There spake my brother. There my father's  
grave  
Did utter forth a voice. Yes, thou must die.

**(relaxed)**

Thou art too noble to conserve a life  
In base appliances.

**(suspense)**

This outward-sainted deputy,  
Whose settled visage and deliberate word  
Nips youth i'the head and follies doth enew  
As falcon doth the fowl, is yet a devil.  
His filth within being cast, he would appear  
A pond as deep as hell.

Although the levels of tension have been randomly allocated to the lines here, this type of exploration can reveal aspects of the text that have not been thought of before. Playing a line or a section of text with the opposite level of tension to the one you might have expected can illuminate more than previously imagined and can offer a variety of ways of interpreting a scene, all of which may be valid.

Why is this useful? *Measure for Measure* is a highly ambiguous text that elicits many different readings or interpretations of any one scene.

Images from a *Measure for Measure* scrapbook, compiled by Meredith MacNeill (Mariana)



This exercise enables us to explore this ambiguity.

\* A more detailed explanation of the seven levels of tension, exercises exploring the language of movement, rhythm, space and the ensemble can be found at [www.complicite.org](http://www.complicite.org)

**Imagination and collective investigation**

All components of making a theatre production are carefully interwoven because they are interdependent. The full acting company were present at all rehearsals – even if they weren't involved in the scene that was being rehearsed – as were the sound designer, sound operator, lighting designer, designer, costume designer and design team. Everyone was invited to contribute to the development of the work collaboratively.

The rehearsal process supported the development of the company's overall imagination: the most important aspect of the rehearsal is collective investigation. From the beginning of rehearsals all members of the acting company, stage management and creative team amassed a wealth of visual and textual stimuli that they each felt resonated with the many aspects of the play. The walls became covered with quotes, photographs and drawings that related to character, themes or space. The actors were also each given a scrapbook into which they pasted photographs, newspaper cuttings and quotes from books and made drawings of anything they felt chimed with their own characters or the world of the play as a whole. Each week the company shared their discoveries with one other.

Many of these stimuli inspired a way of approaching the text: pictures of a Soviet prison inspired a physical exploration of how to create the prison on stage; the film *The Godfather* became a reference point for exploring the role of the Duke; and books on our modern-day sex industry and on sex and Elizabethan England influenced the representation of the brothel in Act 1 Scene 2. Editors' notes suggesting that the Duke's Act 4 Scene 1 soliloquy may have belonged to a different part of the play opened up the possibility of reordering the text at this point, liberating our relationship to the text and

resulted in a major reordering and intercutting of scenes in the rest of the act.

Although this wealth of research material was eclectic in nature - coming from a huge variety of sources, artists and times – collectively, the material engaged the company’s imagination and directly influenced the way they saw the world around them and the play itself.

There are many other aspects of the rehearsal process that are not covered in this workpack, including improvisation, the physical exploration of the dynamics of space and the exploration of text non-verbally through dynamic physical movement. Many of the exercises were created in the moment to explore an avenue of the text that had made itself apparent.

The most important qualities of the rehearsal process were the openness with which the text was received and explored, the acknowledgment of the value of the work, and the understanding that there are numerous ways of exploring Shakespeare. Process is never defined or limited to a singular, linear way of working.

To understand the universality of Shakespeare's text we have to simultaneously explore both the world of the text and the world around us, which demands sensitivity, creativity and imagination.

The quotes shown in this pack are featured in full in the NT/Complicite *Measure for Measure* programme, available for £2.50 from the National's Bookshop.

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photo:  
Johannes Flaschberger

