

The Power of Attention · Suzanne Araas Vesely

A memory of a one-act unscheduled performance of Lear

Participants:

Paul Massie

Wallace Chappell

“Student”

Miriam Gilbert’s undergraduate Shakespeare class, Spring 1985

Miriam Gilbert

Student: (*Enters late, sits separate from the class, near the door*) Paul seems much smaller than on the stage. How narrow the shoulders. . . All those mannerisms I thought were developed for King Lear—they’re really his own. Especially that pained smile, when we ask him about the madness of Lear.

Massie: I drew from my own background. Well. It was not my own experience, of course, of madness, that I drew from. But, it was something that I was afraid of. I had to ask my director (*touches Wally on the arm*) for help. I had to ask Wally—and it is good, if an actor is afraid, to let the director know, so he can nurse you through it. Would you mind closing the blinds? The light bothers my eyes. . . . Ah. That’s better. Now I can see you.

Chappell: What would you like us to talk about?

Gilbert: We could begin with the cuts that were made and why.

Chappell: Time was a factor, of course. We are very proud of the length of our production—only three hours and fifteen minutes.

Massie: Give or take four. And eight minutes can be a long time. The pace of a performance gets set differently each time. Speaking of those cuts, though. When Miriam talked Wally out of using the wonderful scene in which Lear tries his absent daughters—I really resisted that. And Wally

said, “Why don’t we just run through it?” Well, when an actor is fighting for a scene, that’s when he does his best acting. And did I ever fight for that scene! I pulled out all the stops; right?

Chappell: And then I cut it anyway.

Massie (*laughs*): And I am so *grateful* that he did! You see, there’s a certain *curve* (*draws an arc in the air*) to a performance. After I started doing the whole play, I came to trust Miriam’s belief that Shakespeare really did intend to cut that scene. It would have robbed the end of its momentum. The actors would have wanted this cut. It makes *sense*.

Chappell: Ah, well, but our Edmund was upset when I cut his line about how he was going to make restitution as the bastard. He felt he needed one more line to make the transition from a literal bastard to a person with some sympathetic features. I don’t think he ever forgave me for that.

A Question from the Class: Some of those props seemed original. How did you come up with the idea of the rope?

Massie: Ah, that stage business with the rope! You all remember the things that it did? That rope, it had a life of its own! When the fool wound me up in it—well, the rope was incredible! It would keep on tangling around me as I talked, and differently, each time. Sometimes it even got into my teeth and hair!

Chappell: At the end, there was the sight of Lear’s hanged Cordelia, with rope burns on her neck. Oh, she was good at that. She really could look dead. We didn’t even need a visible rope.

Massie: When I was holding Cordelia’s corpse and said, “My poor fool is dead,” it could have also meant the fool hanged himself. He walked off with the rope around his neck, remember?

Question: Was that when the fool could no longer control the madness, and Lear abandoned him?

Chappell (*hesitates*): I wouldn't say *abandoned* . . . (*looks at Paul*) I think it was Lear focusing on whoever could help him.

Question: Oh, you mean going from the fool to Edgar to Gloucester?

Massie: Correction! The Fool, to *mouse*, to Edgar, to Gloucester! I'd say—it's a matter of attention. (*He rises slowly; raising an imperious arm, stabbing at the air with a long finger.*) Right now . . . most of you . . . are paying . . . attention. But you usually don't! And it's a damned insult! I repeat, it's an insult! When an actor is giving his life up there, and some fucker is not paying attention! I've WALKED OFF IN THE MIDDLE, saying, "What do they care? Fuck them!"

Student: I was wrong. Those mannerisms aren't Paul's tics. It's still the King, not Paul, who is talking. How long has he been living this role? Six months? No wonder he was afraid. Wally seems solicitous of Paul. Often pats him on the arm or the knee. Wally is calling out Paul from the tomb of Lear. Lear: "Oh, fool, I shall go mad!"

Lear: "Oh, fool, I shall go mad!" He knew, and he fled. I've always been afraid of loss of mind, but Shakespeare understood: we lose—not mind, exactly, but heart, when we are mad. The intellect goes on working all too well.

Massie: It is hard to drop Lear after so many months. . . . You ask what I'm thinking of before I go on the stage? I ask myself how *I am, now*. And I go on stage with whatever I feel right at that moment. Unaccountable rage. Pettiness. I accept it. And I used those emotions, my own emotions, to create Lear. And so the rest of the play is created new, each night, from what I am feeling when I walk on. Every time, it's different. That's what's exciting. The last performance . . . (*Silence*) I opened my mouth to say the last words . . .

Chappell: The last words are, "Look there . . ."

Massie: Nothing came out . . . except this . . .

Student: Even in this darkened room I see his pale eyes illumined—too brightly. His tears.

Massie: It doesn't take much, anymore, when I think of Lear. He has become a part of me, and it is easy . . . when I think of Lear, for this (*he points to his face*) to start. Acting is—a very—*expensive* profession.

(Exit Massie and Chappell, Massie smiling; Gilbert runs out calling her thanks, returns looking puzzled.)

Gilbert: They're gone!