THE ART OF BLOCKING A SCENE

Practical and Easy Tips for Editing Shakespearean Text

Grade: This resource is designed for the instructor who is blocking a Shakespearian scene for the grade of their choice.

Goal(s): To provide practical blocking tips and effective blocking configurations

Materials: None

DESCRIPTION:

The theatrical term "blocking" means the exact positioning of actors on a stage during a performance by the director. The director is the eye for the audience – a person who sits out front and see the performance before the audience does. The director tells actors wh ere they should move for dramatic effect, clarifying the action of the story, ensure sight lines for the audience, and create visual interest for the audience. When blocking your Shakespeare scene, here are some practical considerations:

1. **PREPLAN**
   It's a good idea to get the scene's blocking sketched out before the first rehearsal. This basic framework for the movement during the scene should include:
   - Who enters where?
   - Who crosses when?
   - Who sits?
   - Who stands?
   - Who exits where?

   This "blueprint" will become the framework of movement in the scene. It's often quite effective during the pre-planning to have a diagram of the stage on which to mark the blocking step by step. This is especially useful scenes involving a large group of performers who appear on stage at the same time. If the paper diagram is not enough for visualization, use pennies (one penny for every actor) on a piece of paper representing the stage.

2. **EMBRACE SHAKESPEARE'S BLANK STAGE**
   Shakespeare's plays were original performed by actors standing on a blank stage with very few set pieces. When blocking a scene for performance, focus on the story's action. What is happening and how can the placement of your actors help to tell that story? Where the director places the actors will create stage pictures that can:

- Clarify the mood of the scene - Characters far-away from each other tells a different story than characters huddle together
- Explain character's status – Prince Hal standing and the court kneeling is a different picture than Fallstaff and his cronies standing around as equals
- Provide visual interest (sitting, kneeling, crouching and standing) by creating levels on a blank stage
- Intensify the action – Capulets and Montagues reacting with both emotions and levels in an open "V" shape on the stage, with Tybalt's death in the center, allows the audience to take in all of the action and drama of the scene
- Define relationships – using the entire stage depth will bring many opportunity to stage the reactions of Richard III's supporters along with his dissenters when blocking the first time he sits on the throne.

Here is an example of one line of iambic pentameter. You will notice that the line starts with an unstressed word, with the second word being stressed (in bold). This pattern continues until the end of the line:

I left no ring with her: what means this lady?

Iambic pentameter is a very useful tool for speakers of Shakespeare's language because it helps to vary and color the words. Shakespeare not only intended this for speaking his words, he mastered it.

Before providing insight in how to cut blank verse, let's look at the third type of text Shakespeare often uses: prose.

3. **TEACH PROPER STAGE TERMINOLOGY**
Everyone using proper stage terminology will streamline the blocking process. Ensure the performers know basic stage directions: up stage, down stage, stage right, stage left, and center stage. Additionally, teach the performers the name and the unique qualities of stage that will be used for the performance:
- Proscenium – audience only on one side
- Thrust – audience on three sides
- Round – audience on 4 sides

The stages at the DPS Shakespeare Festival are proscenium stages. Finally, take the time to teach "turn-out techniques to ensure the actors stay open to the audience:
- Placing the up-stage foot at a slight diagonal to the body
- Gesturing with the upstage arm
- Turning downstage toward the audience

4. **AVOID CRASHES**
Shakespeare infuse his scenes with energy by employing dramatic entrances and exits. Block urgency into the characters' movement when they entering and existing onto the blank the stage. Too many people using the same entrance at the same time will cause problems. Avoid congestion by spacing out the timing of the entrances and exits. If possible, utilize opposite sides of the stage. During busy scenes, make sure each actor has a specific route that does not interfere with another actor's intended path. Also, teach the actors to anticipate each other's

entrances and exits and thereby clear the way with a simple counter for whoever is coming (or going) next.

5. **USE MOVEMENT TO EMPHASIS STRENTH**
   Blocking should emphasize a character's words through movement. Walking in a straight line communicates greater strength and purpose than walking in an arc. Moving downstage strengthens stage presence, while moving upstage usually weakens it. The closer to center stage a character is, the more attention s/he will command from the audience. The same is true for vertical levels. Standing is a stronger position than sitting, and standing on a dais or platform communicates more strength than standing at floor level.

6. **USE THE WHOLE STAGE**
   The director is a painter, and the stage is the canvas. When blocking, paint the corners and borders of the stage — that is, include them in the action of the play. Varying where the action is located on the stage heightens visual interest.

7. **GROUP YOUR CROWDS**
   When the director is blocking crowd scenes, s/he should imagine themselves as a photographer who is composing a well-balanced photograph. As a general rule, "balance" the stage by keeping approximately the same number of characters on the right as on the left. Remember that raising someone vertically adds more "weight" to that person, as does moving them closer to the audience. Aesthetic balance becomes even more important in scenes with a large number of performers such as using a large chorus for the prologue to *Henry V*.

8. **MOTIVATE EACH MOVEMENT**
   Every movement on stage must have a motivation. For some movements, the motivation is easy. A line such as, "Knock, knock, knock! Who's there, i' the name of
   Beelzebub?" should provide enough direction for the actor to know where to go and why. Other motivations, however, are not so straight-forward. You may need a performer to move closer to the stage right entrance to justify the line, "But whose coming? The newly released Hastings?" But what motivated the character to move to that spot ahead of time? Is the character bored with the current conversation? Does the character cross in order to check on the weather outside and then sees Hastings? Are the characters on stage nervous someone is spying on their private conversation? The possibilities are endless.

9. **BLOCKING AS PUNCTUATION**
   Blocking also is used to punctuate and clarify text. Sitting, standing, starting, stopping, and entering are all ways to help the audience understand the character lines through movement. Juliet's final line to Romeo in their famous love scene starts with, "Sweet, so would I," The thought ends and the actress turns out toward the audience to exit, "Yet I should kill thee with much cherishing." Juliet is now facing way from Romeo. "Good night, good night," At the comma she turns and looks directly at

Romeo. "parting is such sweet sorrow," She continues to cross up stage way from him while saying, "That I shall say good night till it be morrow." At the period, she turns one last time glancing over her shoulder at Romeo and then exits immediately. The structure of the line has been clarified. The blocking tells the story of her attraction to Romeo as well as her emotions and her wants. Blocking rehearsals are about bringing the play to life. Proper blocking clarifies the ebb and flow of the play's natural action. With a little thought and planning, even "talky" and expository scenes can be visually interesting and dynamic.

BLOCKING CONFIGURATIONS
Below are simple blocking configurations to activate your Shakespearean scenes.

1. **The Counter-** The counter is a common move that actors should master. The counter clears the path for a new piece of blocking

Actor A cross downstage to actor B
Actor C counters Stage Left

A

B   C
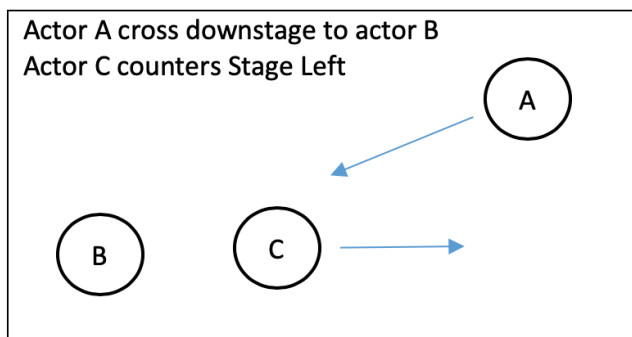
Countering can set up the next piece of blocking.

Actor A cross Stage Left to actor C

B   A   C
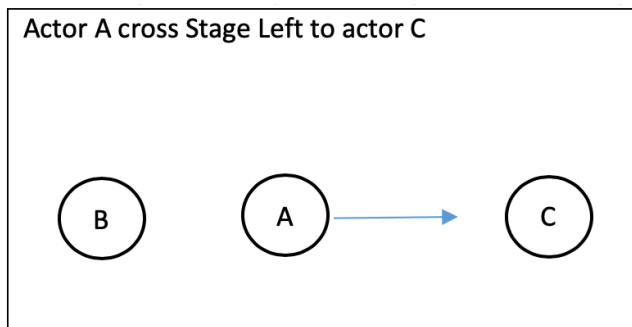
Often but not always, the counter is done without speaking. However, either the director or the actor must decide the reason for the counter. In other words, what makes the actor move?

2. **The Angle-** A stage picture using an angle looks dynamic. Actors in a flat line need variations in height and shape to create visual interest.

Angle   VERSES   Flat

A

B

A   B
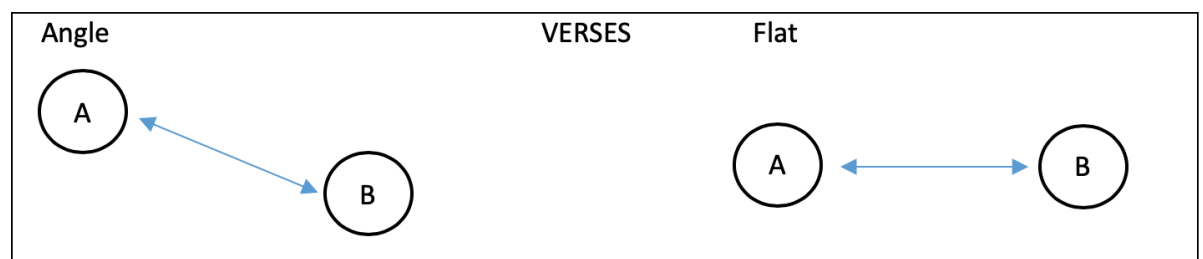
3. **The Triangle-** There few shapes in blocking that give a stage picture so much energy.
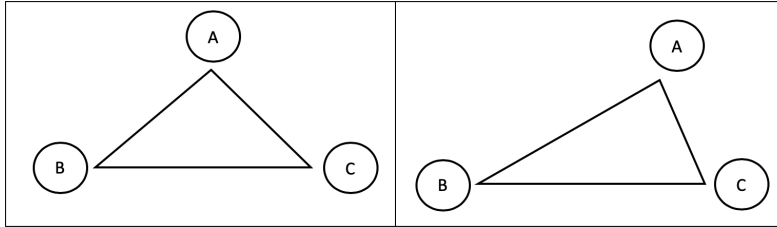
Experiment with any variation on the triangle including the inversion of the shape. Don't limit it to 3 actors. The three points of the triangle Points A, B, and C could also be groups of actors in a crowd scene.
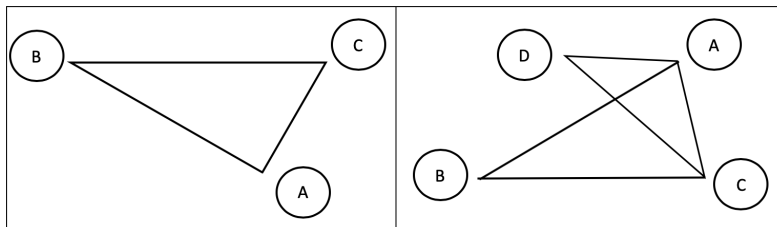
Very often you can move from one triangle to another as in:
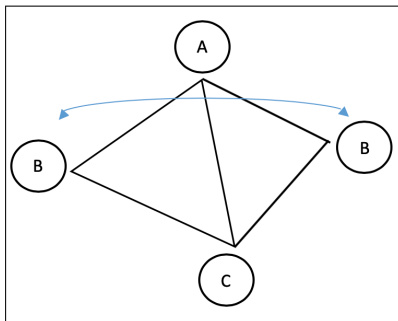
4. **The Bullseye-** This configuration allows for dramatic movement without the actors significantly changing place. This shape is also great for chorus pieces. The actors in the center circle are standing and the actors in the outer circle are sitting. Then with dramatic flair, the inner groups sits and the outer group stands. Be sure to instruct all actors, regardless if they are sitting or standing, to turnout or face the audience.
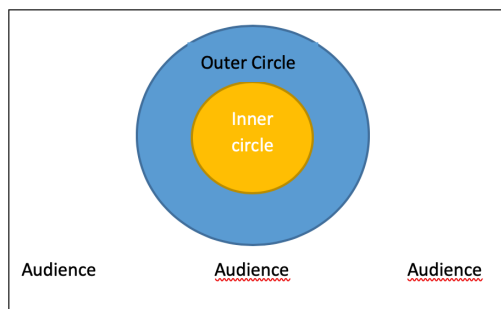
5. **The Forest-** This type of configuration is very effective for any of the speeches that can be done as a chorus. The configuration also keeps young actors in place but allows for visual interest.

   Have your performers stand in 3 to 5 parallel lines. Instruct each row to stand in the window (stand between 2 people where they can be seen) created by the row in front of them.

   Actors are randomly assigned to either A or B groups along with Stage Right and Stage Left groups. When the group or individual performers don't have a line they are sitting while the other groups are standing. This configuration allows for a variety of stage pictures without complicated blocking.
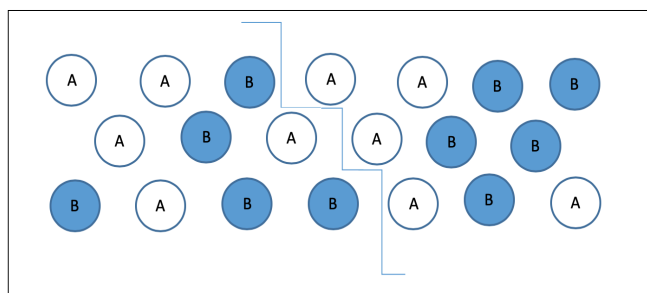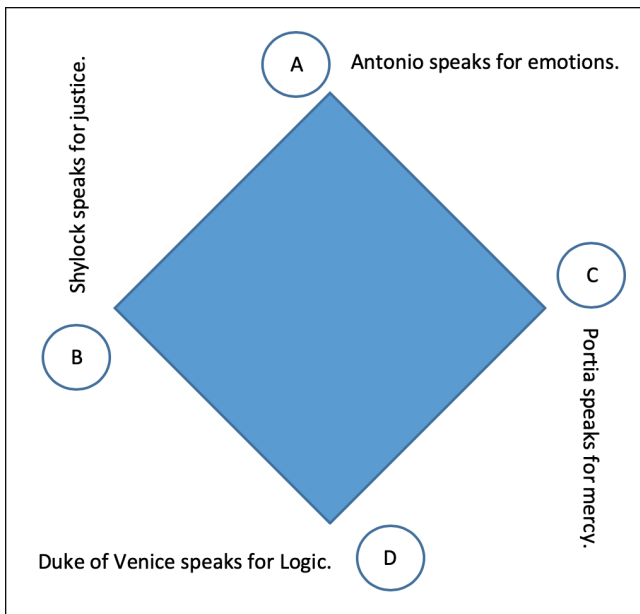

6. **Red Rover-** This configuration gives definition to a blank stage while at the same time providing visual interest. Have the performers stand or sit in parallel lines. The center between the lines is the playing space.
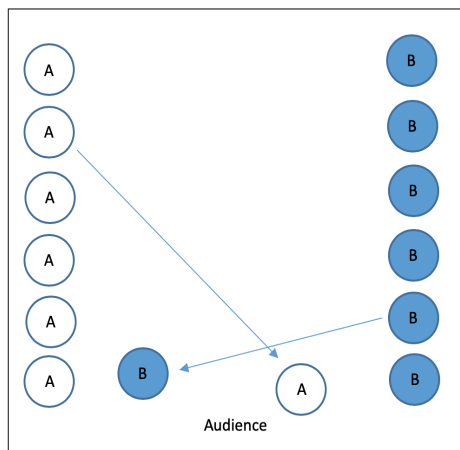
7. **Fan-** This configuration is very similar to Red Rover. The performers are standing or sitting in a fan shape with the action happening center stage. This shape provides great sight-lines for the audience as well as creates a focus point for both the audience and the performers.
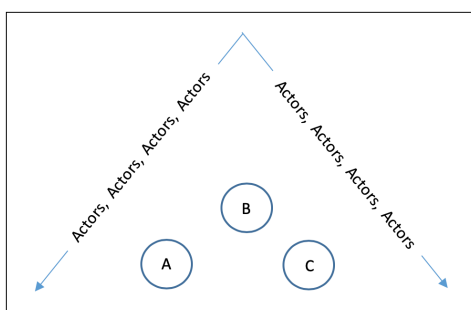
8. **The Diamond-** This is another great individual performer or group configuration that helps to create physical tension to match the verbal arguments in the text. Often Shakespeare will have different characters present diametrical arguments within the same scene such as in the courtroom sequence in Merchant of Venice. Variations on the diamond is to slowly have the shape turn clockwise every time a new person or group presents the new argument.

Shylock speaks for justice.

A — Antonio speaks for emotions.

C

B

Portia speaks for mercy.

Duke of Venice speaks for Logic. — D

9. **Breadline-** This is a simple straight line but infused with interesting body silhouettes. Flat lines become dynamic when the characters have interesting body shapes, varied level of heights, and clear focus.