

**how to act shakespeare good**

## **preface [2025]**

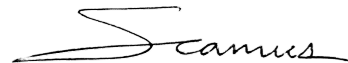
This book began its life as a graduate thesis for an MFA program—and was soundly rejected on the grounds that it was too short, too obscene, too unserious, too dark, and had too many tongues in too many cheeks.

In other words, it was perfect.

And yet, eight strange years later, I wish to soberly say just one thing more:

*“This above all: to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.”*

See you on the boards.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Scamus". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.

## how to act shakespeare good séamus miller

This book tells you how to act  
Shakespeare good.<sup>1</sup>

In most cases, an audience member's understanding of a Shakespearean thought will not exceed that of the actor who is speaking it, and therefore you, the actor, have a responsibility to be clear, intentional, and precise.

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<sup>1</sup> I will not address Shakespeare productions as a whole—which tend to fail or succeed before the first rehearsal, regardless of whether people can act good or not. Perhaps I will write another book, *How to Not Boring (and Also Ugly!) Shakespeare*, regarding this phenomenon and how it may be prevented. That is beyond the scope of this edition.

You must speak all of the words<sup>2</sup>—pronounced correctly, in the correct order, observing metrical structures, with a specific understanding of the complete thought and each word that it contains—and convey that meaning to the audience<sup>3</sup> (using rhythm, pitch, and, to a lesser extent, volume).

Furthermore, the text must be physicalized into a visual story that is congruent with the spoken meaning. Actors play a three-dimensional sport that does not allow for extraneous

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<sup>2</sup> Don't fuck up the famous shit, or people will think you are stupid. You are not stupid—you are acting good at Shakespeare. If you do fuck it up, don't tell anyone you read my book.

<sup>3</sup> If you save them from thinking they are too stupid to “get” Shakespeare by acting it real good, they will come see more of it, and you can keep getting sort-of-paid to act it so good.

movement, unnecessary tension, or lifeless physicality.

The actor's job is not to generate emotions—just as an athlete's job is not to create sweat. Sweat is present only as the byproduct of the action they perform.<sup>4</sup> You must treat every line as a specific, full-body attempt to change something outside of yourself.

Acting is more about technique than talent. With enough time<sup>5</sup>, using the above principles, almost anyone can act good in Shakespeare.

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<sup>4</sup> Analogy courtesy of STC Academy—a place to learn Shakespeare extra good (in case this book doesn't work).

<sup>5</sup> And the help of a competent director, choreographer, & text-coach. For further reading, see: *How to Not Boring (and Also Ugly!) Shakespeare*. Also, there is never enough time.

However, there are three things which are not technical, teachable, or optional:

- Actors must be vulnerably curious
- Actors must live in the right now
- Actors must make choices that are delightful to watch and to perform

Acting Shakespeare good is a generous, beautiful, difficult, and stupid thing to do with your life. You will pretend to be another person in front of other people so good that they will pretend that they don't know that you're doing that.

Read *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene 2.