Sonnet and the Stage
Actor Jonathan Epstein teaches “five-finger exercises for the soul.”

by CRAIG LAMBERT

In 1990, Shakespeare & Company, the distinguished theatrical ensemble in Lenox, Massachusetts, had a problem: the departure of co-founder Kristin Linklater three months before the troupe’s winter acting workshop meant someone else would have to teach Shakespeare’s sonnets in her stead. Co-founder Tina Packer, RI ’95, asked actor Jonathan Epstein ’77 to step in. “At that point I probably knew about one and a half sonnets,” he recalls. “I tried to teach them the way Kristin had taught them to me. It was a total disaster. Since that was really unsuccessful, I got to thinking, over the next few years: what is important to me about the sonnets? By now, I’ve taught them to actors maybe as much as anybody—and so the act of teaching the sonnets is in itself a kind of artistic event.”

Consequently, the sonnets are a way to “experience someone trying to speak as himself. Even if you’re the most articulate person who ever lived, you still fail oftener than you succeed.” He cites sonnets 109 through 112 as an example of how Shakespeare needed a sequence of poems to render the changing nuances of his feelings toward the “Fair Youth” who is the object of the first 126 sonnets. The poet used far different language for the mysterious, alluring Dark Lady of the remaining 28 sonnets.

“Shakespeare’s longing for the young man begins as an aesthetic appreciation, an admiration of youth, standing, power, being well connected—the things he himself didn’t have,” Epstein explains. “The sexual component is a third- or fourth-order item: see how cloaked the references are. With the woman, the sexual element is in the foreground from the start—it’s much more about coitus, possession, jealousy, and satisfaction.”

To explore the polarity between the sonnets’ Latinate words and those with Saxon roots, Epstein sometimes calls a student onstage to speak the contrasting lines antiphonally with him. “The Saxon is more rooted in the body,” he says, “the Romance words, in the lips and face and head.” Lines like “Or some fierce thing replete with too much rage/Whose strength’s abundance weakens his own heart” (sonnet 23) uses Latinate words (“replete,” “abundance”) for “plenty” and surrounds them with monosyllabic Saxon terms.
Regarding the young man, lines like sonnet 73’s “In me thou see’st the twilight of such day/As after sunset fadeth in the west,” Epstein explains, “have all these lovely sibilants—it’s fairly soft language. Then, when he’s talking about the woman (sonnet 129): ‘Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust/Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight./Past reason hunted, and no sooner had./Past reason hated, as a swallow’d bait./On purpose laid to make the taker mad….’ This uses the part of the body that’s lower; it uses the breath rather than the lips and the tongue. Hunted, had are more of a gasp from the lungs.” Such insights emerge from years of work as an actor, not from academic scholarship. Epstein first went on stage at eight; at Harvard he won the Boylston Prize for rhetoric and oratory and was advised by the late William Alfred, who had “an unbelievable capacity to admire. It was the kind of teaching you aspire to.” He began his long association with Shakespeare & Company in 1987, and to date has directed or appeared in more than 50 productions, including title roles in Macbeth, Richard III, and King Lear. (Shakespeare accounts for about half his stage work.) He’s also toured nationally in shows like Man of La Mancha and Dirty Dancing, and worked in regional theater, including many turns at Harvard’s American Repertory Theater. Visit harvardmag.com/extras to see videos of Jonathan Epstein performing several sonnets.
(Wryly, he notes that his 30-second role as Professor Zigman in last year’s Hollywood film *Something Borrowed* was seen by “more people than have ever seen me perform Shakespeare.”)

“For an actor, the sonnets are like a five-finger exercise for the soul, the way a pianist does scales,” he explains. “The body’s being exercised, but what is really being exercised is the mind’s connection with the body and the instrument and the material. For a pianist, the instrument is the fingers; for an actor, it’s the speaking and gesturing self. I’m creating a nimble, articulate channel for all those things to participate in the event together. The objective of the work on the sonnets is to create good Shakespeare players, so somebody can create depth and passion and wit when playing Portia, Orlando, or Dogberry.

“You don’t get to play Lear, or Shylock, or Rosalind unless you bring your whole self into the room,” he continues. “I used to think Shakespeare allowed us to be bigger than ourselves. Now I don’t. Shakespeare allows us to be *life-sized*, as big as we are. That’s enough. And anything less, isn’t.”

—Craig Lambert

The Persistence of Place

An October report in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, drily titled “Neighborhoods, Obesity, and Diabetes—A Randomized Social Experiment” (to which Harvard professors of economics and of healthcare policy contributed), found that moving from an impoverished neighborhood to one more favorably placed resulted in lower levels of adverse health. That finding would hardly surprise Ford professor of the social sciences Robert J. Sampson, whose *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (University of Chicago, $27.50) argues that local community persists, and in fact matters deeply, despite the seeming effects of globalization and a more homogeneous world culture. A monumental work of sociological research, it extends from Sampson’s escorted tour down Michigan Avenue (from the luxury shops of the “Magnificent Mile” to the “jarringly different” scene of the infamous South Side slums) to his detailed analyses of data and explications of theory. From chapter 1, “Placed”:

**Logic demands** that if neighborhoods do not matter and placelessness reigns, then the city is more or less a random swirl. Anyone (or anything) could be here just as easily as there. Identities and inequalities by place should be rapidly interchangeable, the durable inequality of a community rare, and neighborhood effects on both individuals and higher-level social processes should be weak or nonexistent,…

By contrast, the guiding thesis of this book is that differentiation by neighborhood is not only everywhere to be seen, but that it has durable properties—with cultural and social mechanisms of reproduction—and with effects that span a wide variety of social phenomena. Whether it be crime, poverty, child health, protest, leadership networks, civic engagement, home foreclosures, teen births, altruism, mobility flows, collective efficacy, or immigration…the city is ordered by a spatial logic (“placed”) and yields differences as much today as a century ago. The effect of distance is not just geographical but simultaneously social…

Fascination with globalization has tended to deflect attention from the persistence of local variation, concentration, and the spatial logic of inequality. The popular belief that the world is “flat,” in particular, has clouded our thinking on neighborhood effects. This is not to say that globalization theorists are wrong about economic markets or that the facts of ecological concentration are incompatible with the placelessness of many aspects of life. To the contrary, one strand of globalization theory suggests that, if anything, the reverse is true.…The key to theoretical progress is to recognize that the stratification of people and resources across urban areas remains entrenched and evolves in new ways as globalization proceeds. Paradoxically, in fact, inequality among neighborhoods in life chances has increased in salience and may have been exacerbated by globalization.…

I thus reject the common idea that technology, dispersed social networks, state policy, and the accoutrements of (post) modernity explain away neighborhood inequality and a focus on spatial forms of social organization and community.