



# BEYOND THE STAGE

Dramaturgy Notes for the Illinois Shakespeare Festival



## SEEING DOUBLE IN THE 2020 SEASON

“Double, double, toil and trouble,” begins the Three Witches’ chant when Macbeth seeks advice about the upcoming battle. He leaves satisfied, being told that “none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth.” Unfortunately, the Scottish king realizes too late that the Witches’ reassurance was a sham. Well...not exactly. The Witches did speak the truth, just not the truth that Macbeth was led to believe.

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Right before he is cut down by Macduff, Macbeth rails that the treacherous Witches “palter with us in a double sense.” Macbeth is not the only character to fall prey to double meanings; Illinois Shakespeare Festival’s 2020 season is full of references to doubles that cause all kinds of toil and trouble.

Whereas unity and consistency are generally considered good, things that are doubled often carry negative connotations. Expressions such as “duplicitous,” “two-faced,” “double-edged,” and “double-crosser” imply deception or even danger. Shakespeare weaves in references to doubles throughout *Macbeth* exactly when credibility is vital—such as in the Witches’ famous line that I began with. Another example: When Macbeth has second thoughts about killing his royal guest of honor, he comments that Duncan is “here in double trust.” In other words, Duncan has faith in Macbeth because he is both kin and loyal subject. Yet having double the reason not to betray the King is somehow not enough to break off the plotted assassination.

The same paradox of double trust comes up in *Measure for Measure*. Isabella is caught in a brutal dilemma when Angelo demands sex in exchange for her imprisoned brother’s life. In Act 3 Scene 1, the Duke, disguised as a friar, hatches a plan to save Claudio and preserve Isabella’s honor, while also teaching Angelo a lesson. This is the infamous “bed trick,” in which Isabella trades places with another woman in the dark of night. Isabella’s *ad hoc* body double is Mariana, who we learn was once engaged to Angelo but coldly abandoned when her fortune took a plunge. Isabella is understandably apprehensive about this plan; this is deception after all, and we have seen that Isabella is a morally upright individual. To reassure her, the Duke argues that “the doubleness of the benefit defends the deceit from reproof.” In other words, both Isabella and Mariana would get what they want from the bed trick. Yet by mentioning “doubleness,” Shakespeare underscores the moral ambiguity at the heart of

*Measure for Measure*. Is the Duke's plan an effective solution to Vienna's problems, or merely a convenient way to sweep these problems under the rug?

The switch from Isabella to Mariana in bed is one of many instances in which characters pair up to form double images, many of which involve Angelo—a man with double standards. As the Duke's deputy, he doubles as the authority figure in Vienna during his lord's absence. In his first encounter with Isabella, Angelo recognizes that they are kindred spirits in moral austerity, which bizarrely fuels his twisted desire for her. After their first meeting, Angelo tips his hat to the Devil who can “catch a saint (meaning himself) with saints (Isabella),” creating another double image. By the end of the play, Angelo becomes a copy of Claudio, the very man he condemned to death for pre-nuptial sex. He is forced to uphold his betrothal to Mariana at the same time that Claudio officially marries Juliet.

Speaking of Claudio, it appears that he has a doppelgänger lurking about. As a grisly final touch to the trap set for Angelo, the Duke arranges for the exhibition of Claudio's severed head—or rather, the head of a dead pirate who just happens to resemble Claudio. In this admittedly ludicrous plot twist, we see Shakespeare's fascination with doubles in the theatre pushed to the limit.

The folklorish doppelgänger, recently explored in Jordan Peele's supernatural horror film *Us*, can symbolize the psychological strain of seeing two when there should logically only be one. In other words, the double is an effective tool for expressing the anxiety

and discomfort of being in an unpredictable world. This idea may help us to see Richard Bean's *One Man, Two Guvnors* as more than a light-hearted slapstick comedy. Bean's play is a modern adaptation of Carlo Goldoni's 1745 Italian classic *The Servant of Two Masters*. While the idea of one person working multiple jobs is not unusual to us (sadly, it is the only way that many people survive today), it was both an absurd and potentially subversive premise in past eras, when the social order rested on stable vertical lines connecting vassal and lord, servant and master. As in Shakespeare, doubleness in Goldoni's play renders things ambiguously fuzzy. Being one-hundred-percent faithful to your boss is a virtue...but two-hundred-percent?

*One Man, Two Guvnors*, set in 1963 England, relies on double images also for comedic effect. Francis tries his best to hide the fact that he is working for two people—one of whom is disguised as her murdered twin brother. (Another body double!) Chaos and confusion await Francis at every turn as he wrestles with double the luggage to carry, double the mail to deliver, and double the errands to run. Confused by his own double-dealings, Francis gets into a fight with himself:

*(He slaps himself.)* You slapped me!? Yeah, I did. And I'm glad I did. *(He punches himself back.)* That hurt. Good. You started it.

Who is he talking to? Himself or his double? One of the running gags in this play is a character that Francis invents to explain his way out of awkward situations: Paddy, an Irishman stereotypically up to no good. But

Paddy begins to take over the play, as if Francis is possessed by a malicious spirit. Near the end of the play, Francis literally turns into Paddy by putting on an atrocious Irish accent. The doppelgänger has replaced the real person. A moment of witchcraft perhaps in an otherwise cheerful comedy.

Am I overanalyzing these plays? Am I being paranoid in seeing doubles everywhere? Probably. But bear with me a little longer. We have to deal with deceptive appearances all the time in our complex modern lives. In politics and the media, words are twisted around and taken out of context so that it is becoming alarmingly difficult to establish even basic facts. Whereas double-speak in real life can be maddening, it fuels irony and suspense in the theatre. Seeing double creates a kind of psychological friction as we juggle two possibilities in our minds at once, keeping us alert. So, I say seek out doubles whenever you go to the theatre. I guarantee you will get double your money's worth.

One final thought: Somehow, I have managed to write an entire essay about doubles without talking about *doubling*—the technique of assigning multiple roles to a single actor. At ISF, doubling works on two levels. Sometimes an actor will play more than one role in the same play—our season's "opening act," *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)*, is an excellent example of this idea, where the three-person company runs through dozens of Shakespearean roles at breakneck speed. But one of the fun things of having a shared acting company like ISF's is that audiences can see double-images of characters from the other plays in repertory. For example, in last year's season, Ashley

Hart Adams played Phebe in *As You Like It*, but for audiences who saw *Pride and Prejudice* first, they may have experienced an echo of the elegant Jane Bennet in the rustic shepherdess—or Brutus' estranged wife Portia if they started with *Caesar* instead. When you come to ISF next summer, I encourage you to try tracking these double images across all three plays.