

CONSERVASTORY: BILL BALL AT A.C.T. IN 1971, AS REMEMBERED BY SANDS HALL

Summer of 1971, my brother, Oak, was enrolled in A.C.T.'s Summer Training Congress. Even though Oak insisted that Christopher Marlowe had invented blank verse and was a better playwright than my beloved Shakespeare, I admired him deeply, and was delighted when he invited me along to a day of classes. After African Dance, I ran up the stairs behind him to a studio above busy Geary Street and experienced for the first time circumstances that would become familiar and beloved: an empty, battered space filling with bodies that dropped selves and bags to the floor with exquisite ease. To-go cups studding every surface. People lifting legs to ears, bowing foreheads to knees. The quick roll of a head, the muh, muhmuhs the peter piper pickeds. I loved it. I wanted to be an endless part of it.

"Whoa! You're lucky," Oak whispered. "Ball's teaching today."

At first glance Bill Ball appeared to be a short and balding man, but in seconds he filled every corner of that room, commanding fierce attention. Words were delectable pieces of fruit he offered to us, beginning by reminding us of elements of verse—iamb, trochee, spondee—which led to a discussion of architecture as frozen music, which segued into the value of a well-trained voice, followed by a description of beekeeping and the resultant honey, which led to King Lear. I was rapt.

"Before Lear divides his kingdom," Ball said, "he speaks in blank verse." With one hand he beat five iambs on the back of a nearby chair.

"But out on the moors with the Fool, he's in a storm, a storm that reflects the one in his head. There, Shakespeare drops the order that iambic pentameter places on language. 'My wits begin to turn,' Lear says. After which, the rhythm falls away, and he speaks largely in prose."

Before us, Ball morphed into an old man. "Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as though art." He tugged at his clothes as if he'd yank them off. "Off, off, you lendings! The disorder in Lear's brain is reflected in the words he is given to say and how he says them. And then, Cordelia dies."

He held out his arms, as if he carried her. "As Lear stumbles in with her, grieving this vast loss, he once again speaks in perfect iambic pentameter:

*Why should/a dog/ a horse/ a rat/ have life
And thou/no life/at all. /Thou't come/ no more— "*

He knelt and placed the dead Cordelia on the floor before us. "But watch how, with Lear's penultimate line, Shakespeare breaks not only Lear's heart—and ours—but all the rules of iambic pentameter....

*"Thou't come no more," Ball repeated, stressing the iambs.
Never/never/never/never/never.*

I had my hands held to my heart. I could hardly breathe. "Not five iambs in that line, But five trochees. What's Lear say then?" He gestured at own shirt.

Pray you, undo this button: thank you, sir.’
He stressed the iambs lightly. “Lear’s learned his lesson in humility, hasn’t he? But what now? What final twist?”

He gestured to the invisible figures we could see so clearly, the one kneeling, the other prone. Again he spoke as Lear:

Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips!’

“Lear thinks she lives. The first part of that line, the stresses could be anywhere, yes? But by the end of it, order has reasserted itself.”

Look there! Look there!

“You can see him pointing, can’t you?” Ball said, “and with such hope? And yet grabbing at his heart, too, as it finally cracks.”

There was not a sound in the studio.

“This,” Ball said, “this honey is what Shakespeare gives us to work with, to utilize when we are finding the architecture of our scripts. You’ll find, almost always, that the music of a character’s verse jangles when his emotions do. All right. Class dismissed.”

I stumbled out of that sunlit studio high with what I’d just discovered. I couldn’t stop talking about it.

“Yeah, yeah,” my brother said, and cackled, knowing he was about to get a huge reaction out of me. “But Christopher Marlowe is the better playwright.”