

Shall I Compare Thee to an Andy Grove?

by Harriet Rubin

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In a world of princes and apprentices, the performance of Shakespeare's plays can release your inner king or queen.

by Harriet Rubin

Between 1986 and 1997, I created and edited a line of books called *Currency*, devoted to leadership as a vehicle for changing both business and society. I worked at that time with some great CEOs: Andy Grove of Intel, Dee Hock of Visa, Max De Pree of Herman Miller, Phil Knight of Nike, and Howard Schultz of Starbucks. I went to each of them with the same question: What is needed to make a great leader, and why are great leaders so rare?

I soon discovered that even the most admired individuals, among them the CEOs whose books I published, couldn't explain their success any better than an outsider could. But a few stories — often anecdotes that the authors wouldn't allow us to make public — hinted at the secret of leadership. It always had to do with pretense, playing a role, and the theatrical arts. I was intrigued, for example, by a story told at Intel about Grove's time as leader. Grove insisted that his brilliant but shy managers attend a seminar they called "wolf school." Attendees learned how to lean into a superior's

face and shout out an idea or proposal. By dramatically showing a fierce belief in themselves, they would convince Intel's hard-nosed managers of the value of their idea. If they didn't feel fierce, they had to pretend. The message: Act powerful and you become powerful. Teach your murmuring voice to howl.

Oddly enough, many leaders I met seemed to be at their strongest when they were most *inauthentic*. It was as if their reserves of character had been created not by digging out their authentic selves, but by playing a character. The best phrase I heard to describe this came from a 1988 conversation with Roger Ailes. He talked about the "theater of leadership." I had just published his book, *You Are the Message* (with Jon Kraushar), a guide to public speaking and media presence. He was then an independent television producer and Republican campaign strategist; he had helped Ronald Reagan develop such soaring phrases as "It's morning again in America" and "the shining city upon a hill." To Ailes, the more polished and constructed a public figure was, the greater the mythic power his or her character conveyed.



It's understandable that many people are concerned about this kind of image-constructing artifice, especially when voiced by the man who would later found Fox TV and showcase such well-known partisan pundits as Rush Limbaugh, Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, and Alan Colmes (all of whom have constructed themselves into just that sort of larger-than-life character). But whatever your political point of view, consider this aspect of Ailes's theme: What if it's true that one part of leadership development is

mean you should avoid the theatrical arts; it means you should choose your roles extremely carefully. Indeed, you'd want to spend your time, day after day, living through theatrical experience with kings, queens, and princes who struggled their way through the ambiguities and challenges of power. You would want to turn to Shakespeare.

Prince Hal's Eloquence

As it happens, the directors of England's Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) also recognize the value of

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It may be that by playing a leader, you can develop the courage and judgment needed in a leadership position.

learning to explicitly play a role? What if this role playing becomes a kind of training for the inner self — not just a disguise or artifice, but also a method for adopting beliefs and values internally, so they become more natural and grounded as you continue to declaim them on the stage of your organization? As we're learning from cognitive neuroscience, the continual performance of an action literally changes the neural pathways of the brain; it may be that by playing a leader on stage, you can develop the courage, decisiveness, and judgment needed in a leadership position. And anyone who has been to the theater knows that a good director can turn a young person who has never run anything into a convincing king.

True, playing a role so wholeheartedly can lead to overconfidence, arrogance, and even a tragic loss of perspective. But that doesn't

playacting for building the character of a leader. Here's how the RSC described the process in a playbill for an autumn 2007 performance of *Henry IV*: "Shakespeare and his fellow actors could display their own formidable abilities to don royal or ducal robes and speak the way kings and queens ought to speak; did this persuasive impersonation of royal authority hint that leadership was a kind of performance that could be assumed by any gifted person, regardless of rank or experience?"

Thus I found myself, in mid-summer, on a three-hour train ride from London to Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare's birthplace. I had been invited to visit the RSC during its preparations for the fall season — which included all of Shakespeare's major history plays. It sounded like a rare opportunity for a tutorial in power and performance, watching some of history's

most inspiring rulers deal with unprecedented issues of judgment, responsibility, and the consequences of their actions. What could I learn about leadership by watching a good theater director and his crew of voice coaches and dramaturges at work?

I knew that some great leaders, particularly political figures, had turned to Shakespeare for inspiration. His plays were taught at the premier British barrister academies, the Inns of Court. Queen Elizabeth I copied out parts of Shakespeare's *Henry V* while planning an address to her troops on the eve of a decisive battle waged by British forces against the Spanish Armada. Thomas Jefferson made his own pilgrimage to Stratford, even (according to John Adams) getting down on his knees and kissing the ground. Abraham Lincoln spent hours reading aloud from Shakespeare's histories and tragedies for the benefit of his friends and companions. Even today, Shakespeare's last history play, *Henry V*, is one of four works studied by military personnel in the Pentagon's Legacy Project to develop leadership potential.

At Stratford, I opened my conversation with RSC Artistic Director Michael Boyd by asking him which Shakespearean character he would choose to be led by. It was during a rehearsal lunch, over a plate of vinegary beets and stew so ghastly that it looked like prop entrails from a murder scene. The Shakespearean leader that Boyd most admires is Prince Hal, the protagonist of *Henry V*.

"Shakespeare wrote about so many different models of consensual leadership during his life," said Boyd. "Leading from the front, charismatic leadership, leadership by force. But in the character of

Hal, he simply showed how a leader puts one foot in front of the other to meet the new challenges of each moment. Why not just enjoy life, enjoy the booze and the women, and reject the very notion of authority?" But Prince Hal, according to the story as Shakespeare told it, is compelled, bit by bit, to play a more difficult and responsible role.

The prince has grown up as the heir to a usurper: His father, Henry IV, murdered the legitimate king. Guilt and treachery marked Henry IV's reign, and Hal wants little to do with it. "[Hal] has inoculated himself against the problem of being born into an elite," says Boyd. "He rejects that elite and then nonetheless takes on his responsibility when it comes. He has to spurn that part of his life that is dearest to him to be useful as a king."

As he grows up, Henry V becomes a consummate man of action — pragmatic and resolute.

a bridge to people — in a conscious and gifted way. Even the modern ear, more than 400 years after the play was written, can hear Prince Hal varying his tone to connect with his audiences; yet each of these different styles conveys power and action. "He has all these different registers," says Alison Bomber, the RSC voice and text coach. "He can talk to the soldiers in their register. He can talk to the churchmen. He can produce a trumpet clangor of sound, the sense of space in the vowels giving him true authority; then in the battle there are clanging, jangly sounds." At one point, Prince Hal fools Falstaff by acting the part of a server of mead at Eastcheap Tavern. Yet when he might lose his own life in battle, he speaks in a classically regal tone that represents pure power and acceptance of fate. When people recall Laurence Olivier's portrayal of Henry V, they are usually thinking of this speech.

Queen Elizabeth I copied out parts of *Henry V* for an address to her troops before they battled the Spanish Armada.

His most controversial move, as he assumes the crown upon his father's death, is to banish his closest friend and dissolute tutor, Falstaff. "This doesn't dehumanize Henry V," says Boyd. "He's conscious of his own failings and mortality; he has a fairly profound sense of humility. He even finds a way to embrace his father before his death — and then he braces himself to perform the role of king. Any leader who is not ambivalent about power is not believable."

Prince Hal also uses language as

I asked Boyd if he recognized any Hals among the well-known leaders of our time. "Nelson Mandela," he said, "because of the switch from opposition to rule. He kept himself intact during the transition. Gordon Brown [at the time of our conversation, the U.K. prime minister for only two months] has certain Hal-like qualities that he hasn't lost. I don't think that he will lose the common touch."

But although Henry V may share the eloquence of a Mandela,

he is no Mandela. He went to war with a false claim to the throne of France, in a hasty, angry reaction to a nasty encounter with a French diplomat. He used empty rhetoric — most famously, referring to his troops as a “band of brothers” to stoke them up for a fight in which many would die. Poet William Butler Yeats, who went to Stratford to study the history plays while

down.” But a credible leader must then become vital and powerful, and this transition must not feel forced. In the end, says Boyd, “You know why you are at the top of the hierarchy and you can look someone in the eye. That is a king being comfortable in his body — dramatizing the range of being human.”

The most charismatic sovereigns can accept even the worst

The play begins with Richard II’s unspeakable acts — banishing his political enemies and confiscating their family wealth — and continues until the end of his reign, when his rival Henry Bolingbroke stands up to him and confiscates the throne. By that point, Richard has given up fighting; he recognizes that ending his reign is the right thing to do for the kingdom. He is utterly and wisely human. By contrast, the usurper Bolingbroke (now Henry IV) mounts the stairs to the throne with the weight of cares and guilt, and a question of why he ever wanted to be king.

Richard II is not without his flaws, but arrives in the end at a kind of peace. Perhaps that’s why Queen Elizabeth I is said to have commented, toward the end of her reign, “I am Richard II, know ye not that?” Was she simply talking about her fears of being murdered (as many historians think), or did she have something else in mind? She was famous for her quiet, firm temperament as queen, amid almost 45 years of rebellions, plots, and wars. Did she find in Richard’s example some self-possession that allowed her to play that role?

Charismatic Cleopatra

William Shakespeare stopped writing about kings as he entered the last third of his life. His protagonists in his final plays, starting with Cordelia in *King Lear*, are often young women who achieve a startling maturity and teach the men they admire and love how to be both more human and greater leaders. Perhaps this reflects Shakespeare’s own life trials; after his son, Hamnet, died at age 11, the playwright, who apparently divided his time between Stratford and London,

Of all the Bard’s protagonists, Richard II most embodies the soul of leadership.

preparing for a stint as senator of the Irish Free State, commented that Shakespeare could not have admired Hal. The prince is too calculating; to admire him would take the soul of a magistrate, said Yeats.

Many leaders, struggling to reconcile conflicting priorities — like the need to pursue quality while making the numbers — will find Hal’s pragmatic perseverance particularly relevant. How to act the part? According to Boyd, “Throw yourself fully into every part of the journey, especially if it conflicts with the reason for the journey. Embrace paradox. Self-doubt is the single most defining characteristic of Shakespeare’s great leaders.”

The Sacrifice of Richard II

Leaders, in other words, express power and confidence not by suppressing or banishing doubt, but by incorporating it into their resolve. Boyd likes to see the actors who are playing kings to occasionally be uncomfortable in their bodies. He teaches them to keep their heads low at first. “Let the audience see that here is a burden that pulls you

about themselves. Boyd often builds his actors’ confidence by having them think about times they have behaved badly. “You have to dramatize moments of blazing incompetence,” he said. “Audiences are always behind the fattest, baldest, shortest actor, but the temptation is to let vanity make you be ashamed. What I try to do as director is to break down those embarrassments.” In a rehearsal, Boyd might ask an actor to do something obscene or to draw attention to someone else in a rude or deliberately demeaning way, just to bring the most shameful parts of themselves out into the light for a moment.

Of all the Bard’s protagonists, perhaps Richard II most embodies the multitude-containing, embarrassment-embracing soul of leadership. Yeats declared, for example, that Richard II was his favorite Shakespearean character: A terrible leader at the start, petulant and self-absorbed, who ultimately relinquishes his crown. Says Michael Boyd: “The key is to become a Richard II, but not to play him weak. Play him strong.”

spent more time in Stratford to be close to his wife and two daughters.

How do you play the character of a great leader who is both deeply human and strong enough to rise above day-to-day politics? You look to Cleopatra, the heroine-regent of the play that T.S. Eliot considered Shakespeare's finest work, *Antony and Cleopatra*. I was thus grateful to see Tina Packer twice in a rare performance of this play — first in rehearsal and then onstage — in the role of the charismatic queen.

Packer, who is the founder and artistic director of the Berkshire Mountains theater group Shakespeare & Company, is in her late 60s, which makes her about 15 years older than the previous oldest Cleo on record, Dame Judi Dench, who played the role at the age of

first, whenever the hunky 40-ish actor playing Antony took the stage, Packer seemed to recede and even disappear. But gradually, during the rehearsal, Packer's presence improved, and by showtime, she was the center of attention: the queen of the performance.

In part, she did it with charm. Through every gesture and vocalization, Cleopatra communicates that being a leader means having a free-wheeling, iconoclastic, joyous role to play. That's what makes her, as critic Harold Bloom put it, "the most vital woman in Shakespeare." Though her country has been conquered by Rome, she does not countenance despair. She laughs at everything that her suitors and courtiers say; she represents a culture of pleasure that will endure

Increasingly over the next 10 years, institutions will have to make a place for women of maturity. As the baby-boom generation ages, its power will accrue increasingly to women. They age more slowly than men, and they remain stronger longer. They are often treated as outsiders, even when they are sovereign. And yet when placed in positions of power, they are often superb rulers. They learn how to manage the state, the world, the men, the monarchs, and, in the end, their own legacy — just as Cleopatra managed her own demise — without losing their appreciation for the unmanageable, pleasure-seeking life force of wholehearted men and women.

Good-to-Great Leaders

Henry V, Richard II, and Cleopatra are all powerful leaders precisely because they are complex. They are neither wholly good nor wholly bad; in responding to the call of duty, they transcend their own imperfections without losing their humanity. If Jim Collins identified good-to-great companies, these are good-to-great leaders.

Alison Bomber, the RSC voice coach, told me that actors learn to play different types of leaders with distinct styles of phrasing and presence. Shakespeare's purely evil characters, like Henry IV (Hal's father) and Richard III, are wolves and predators. "They deal in crunch phrases. Their language tastes bad." And then there are some benevolent rulers, such as Henry VI, who is "often considered a Jesus figure," says Bomber. "His language is soft and open. It's made of vowel sounds and fewer explosive *p*, *t*, and *b* sounds. His comprehension of the world around him is beautiful, but

The character of Cleopatra communicates that being a leader means having an iconoclastic, joyous role to play.

53 in 1987. Dench had at first demurred, saying she would seem like "a menopausal dwarf" in the role of the Egyptian queen who brought the beloved Roman general Mark Antony to his knees and shook the absolute ruler Julius Caesar in his boots. But she, and now Packer, have proved that age is no barrier, and is possibly even a boost, to portraying a female ruler famous for wisdom, maturity, and seductiveness.

As I watched the rehearsal, I thought of Hillary Clinton, another female politician trying to build her public presence with an extremely visible longtime consort nearby. At

even within the Roman ethic of policing and laws. No wonder Antony falls for her.

Cleopatra also has the perspective to understand the significance of what she has lost. She stands for Hellenic ideals of excellence for its own sake, against the legal strictures of Caesar's Roman Empire. She wins over Antony because this fierce general has come to the point where wars no longer gratify him. He wants a Hellenic world, where beauty, education, sport, and family will prevail. In the face of the rule of law, it takes a lot of courage to stand up, even on a theater stage, and proclaim the value of the rule of beauty.

he's powerless to act.”

But to play a good-to-great character, a transformative leader who also transforms himself or herself, says Bomber, “you need the courage, space, and confidence to start slowly and speak slowly. You hardly need to hurry. Time belongs to you. Great leaders even move slowly. Richard II speaks out every word. He enters and looks around. He wants to be seen.”

The word *time*, says Bomber, is the most important of Shakespeare's words. In verse, he gave it two syllables: *time-uh*. “Drop the breath deep in the body. People think you have to inhale in order to say something long and important. But really all you have to do to breathe in is to breathe out fully. This pushes the breath deep in the body.”

In their most significant scenes, Shakespeare's greatest leaders are direct and vulnerable rather than grandiose. For example, to bare his soul in the RSC production, Richard II divests himself of wig, makeup, and brocaded robes; he stands, smaller and more numinous, radiant. He has given up the power of the throne to accept the fate of being human — and thus a majesty greater than kingship. Audiences, faced with this kind of surrender onstage, are attracted rather than repelled. They trust the leader who presents himself or herself so authentically; perhaps they know that even if the authenticity is artifice, it must tap into some real persona to register.

So they may practice portraying this type of character, the Royal Shakespeare Company trains its actors to reduce their physical tension. Audiences subconsciously read tension around a performer's shoulders and neck in the same way that

children deftly read their parents' emotions. When the actor is tense, the audience also tenses up and stops listening, or listens with distrust. “One of the great releases,” said Bomber, “is belly breathing to activate the lower abdominals. Put your thumb on your belly button and flare the rest of the fingers downward. Say ‘Fffff’ until you've released all the breath.”

Next, Bomber asked me to open my mouth to a comfortable width and hold up the number of fingers that I thought would fit into that space. I held up two fingers. But when I tried to actually put them in my mouth, they didn't fully fit at all. “We believe our mouth is wider open than it is,” said Bomber. “So people think we are holding something back. If we can learn to release our jaws a bit more, that is very effective.”

As the pressures on our world increase, people will not want overconfident leaders; we've seen the crises that an excess of certainty can produce. We will want leaders who know the price of power; who are willing to exercise power nonetheless; and who recognize the value of doubt, harmony, and beauty. When we enter leadership positions ourselves, we may not see at first the extent to which those qualities reside within us; we may need to practice and polish them in order to instill them. That, I believe, is what the characters of Henry V, Richard II, and Cleopatra have to offer: a way to talk, and thus to think, of leadership. Perhaps every CEO candidate should be asked to memorize these three roles, and recite the appropriate lines as part of the interview. For those who would be leaders, let the inner sovereigns remake us. +

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