

4: Treading the Boards

A. Speak the Speech, I Pray You

1. Class title 1 (Ashton: *Enigma Variations*)
2. Section title A (Mark Rylance as Richard III)

Today's class will all be about the depiction of real people on the stage, whether in spoken drama, musical theatre, ballet, or opera. I had a lot to choose from, and decided to cut it down by sticking strictly to the stage and avoiding film, even films based on plays. I want to start with **William Shakespeare** (1564–1616), the first speech of *Richard III*. The Wars of the Roses are over; Richard's brother, the Duke of York, is on the throne. Richard himself is not merely a "spare"; he way down the line of succession, and intends to do something about that. The photo shows **Mark Rylance** in the role, but I don't have a clip of him in this speech—besides, I want us to ignore production elements and concentrate on the *words*. So I give you an actor I don't know, **Stephen Stanton**, speaking the text by candlelight. And as he does, I want you to think: What is it about a Shakespeare soliloquy that makes it akin to a painted portrait?

3. Shakespeare: *Richard III*, opening speech
4. — text of the above, 1
5. — text of the above, 2
6. — text of the above, 3

So what does a Shakespeare soliloquy have in common with a portrait? It is more than seeing the person's life unfolding in a bio-drama. Shakespeare's soliloquies still the action, and focus in upon the figure's inner thoughts and feelings, much as a good portraitist would do. These are *composed* pieces, composed in most cases by the character himself. You can see this very clearly in the first section, how Richard uses deliberate irony to paint the new age of peace in an uncomplimentary light. Then he breaks off to tell us something about himself—the most emotional section of the speech. Finally, he explains his plans to get his middle brother and nephews out of the line of succession.

7. Mark Rylance as Richard III, with original portrait.

Of course, there is one aspect, in which a stage play is totally unlike a portrait. Most painted portraits involve personal interaction between artist and sitter; they begin in the present tense. All the stage "portraits" I am going to show are in the past—although there are a few instances coming up that feature people who were still alive when the work was produced. But the real reason why the time shift does not matter in the theater—and I mean live theater, not film or TV—is because though the subject may be dead, the actor playing him is very much alive, and re-creating the character in the present tense every night.

8. Paul Scofield as Antonio Salieri (*Amadeus*, National Theatre, 1979)

When I announced on the website that one of the featured works today would be *Amadeus* (1979) by **Peter Shaffer** (1928–2016), I just assumed that the “portrait” would be that of the title character, **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**. But Mozart in Shaffer’s play is a yob, a perpetual teenager, vulgar and irreverent. The only signs of Mozart’s inner transcendence come in the snatches of music we hear, or what his nemesis, the god-fearing **Antonio Salieri**, describes. What he cannot stand is the contrast, that the voice of God should emerge from such a creature. No, if the purpose of the portrait-soliloquy is to reveal the inner life of the character, it is Salieri’s soul that is plumbed, not Mozart’s. Here is **Paul Scofield**, the original performer in the original stage production.

9. Shaffer: *Amadeus*, Salieri hears Mozart’s music for the first time

Note how the playwright has no need to depict Mozart himself in that last clip; the music does the job for him; it also brings Salieri’s description of a past event once more into the present tense.

10. Micheál MacLiammóir and Oscar Wilde

The stage format where you feel the present tense most strongly is paradoxically not the full production with its décor and illusion, but the one-man show. The Irish actor **Micheál MacLiammóir** (1899–1978) wrote and starred in such as show about **Oscar Wilde**, *The Importance of Being Oscar* (1960). It played in Dublin, London, Broadway, and elsewhere for a total of over 1,300 performances. Here he is describing Wilde’s last days in Paris, dying in disgrace and almost—but not quite—alone. Sorry about the sound.

11. Micheál MacLiammóir: *The Importance of Being Oscar*

12. Micheál MacLiammóir costume design, and portrait by Muriel Brandt

I hope you noted how easily MacLiammóir the actor slips in and out of Oscar Wilde, the character. That one of Ireland’s greatest actors should channel one of her greatest writers is surely no surprise. But what came as a huge surprise to me just before writing this is to learn that “MacLiammóir” himself was an assumed role. I have just found out that the actor was born **Alfred Lee Willmore** to a family of no Irish connections in a London suburb. He moved to Ireland, assumed this fake identity, and maintained it for the rest of his life. But then, as a gay man at the time, that was not the only fake identity he would have had to maintain.

13. Lin-Manuel Miranda and Alexander Hamilton

One of the things portraitists usually try to do is make the image look like the sitter. So it seems outrageous that the 2015 musical *Hamilton*, about a bunch of white dudes, should have been cast entirely with persons of color, beginning with its creator **Lin-Manuel Miranda** (1980–) in the title role. But it works; it works extremely well. Because what really matters is not the appearances but the personalities and the ideas. I have showed the opening sequence several times before, in which Hamilton comes to New York City, and draws all around him into his whirlwind energy. I want now to play a more reflective moment from shortly before his duel with Aaron Burr. Alas, it is very short.

14. Miranda: *Hamilton*, duel scene

B. Living History

15. Section title B (*The Four Seasons*)

16. Plays with then-living characters

The time-shift in *Hamilton* is about two-and-a-half centuries. Are there not any plays about characters who are still living? Well, there are a number of **autobiographical plays**, but they belong in next week's class on self-portraits. Among others, though, I found these three. **William Gibson's** 1957 play *The Miracle Worker* was based on a memoir by disability-rights advocate **Helen Keller**, and came out a decade before her death; the title character **Annie Sullivan**, though, had died in 1939. *The Normal Heart*, **Larry Kramer's** play about the AIDS crisis, first produced in 1985, was partly autobiographical and partly based on real people whom Kramer frankly identified. Given the subject, many of them were dead, but among the living was the model for the lead character, **Rodger McFarlane**, President of the **Gay Men's Health Crisis** organization. And *Jersey Boys*, the 2004 musical by **Marshall Brickman** (1939–) and **Rick Elice** (1956–), tells the story of the rise of **Frankie Valli** and the Four Seasons from their working-class New Jersey backgrounds to international success. All three plays became successful films, but I am not showing movies. However, the stage version of *Jersey Boys* made it big on Broadway, virtually sweeping the Tonys in 2006. And introducing the segment at the awards was **Joe Pesci**, who was involved with the group before he became a famous actor and is a character in the show; he is accompanied by the three surviving members of the original group.

17. Joe Pesci introduces *Jersey Boys* at the Tonys

18. Daniel Barenboim and Jacqueline du Pré

These photos show the British cellist **Jacqueline du Pré** and the Argentine-born pianist **Daniel Barenboim**. Already a youthful sensation in Britain, she met him at Christmas 1966, fell in love, converted to Judaism, then flew to be married in Jerusalem just before the Six-Day War, six months later. She was 22; he was 25. Both were already well connected in the musical world, so it was nothing to assemble a group for the **Schubert Trout Quintet** consisting of **Itzak Perlman**, **Pinchas Zuckerman**, **Zubin Mehta**, Barenboim, and du Pré. Here is a clip from it: the face you see is hers, but the tune on the piano is being played by Barenboim.

19. Schubert: *Trout Quintet* (excerpt from film by Christopher Nupen)

A series of high-profile concerts and recordings followed. Then four years later, in 1971, du Pré noticed the first symptoms of multiple sclerosis. She struggled through the next two years before playing her last concert in New York in 1973. She died 14½ years later, in 1987.

20. Cathy Marston

A few years ago, British choreographer **Cathy Marston** (1975–), invited to create a new work for the 2020 season of the Royal Ballet, chose the tragic life of Jacqueline du Pré. It would have three main characters: du Pré herself, a dancer personifying the cello, and du Pré's former husband Daniel Barenboim. She was dead, but Barenboim was very much alive, now one of the world's preeminent

conductors, and based in Berlin. But he was enthusiastic about the project, asking only that they make him handsome. Here are two short excerpts from the resulting work, called simply *The Cellist*. In the first, de Pré auditions for Barenboim, who wastes no time in getting rid of her mother and claiming her for himself. The second is after she realizes she is ill. The music by **Philip Feeney** (1954–) incorporates references to many well-known works from the cello repertoire. No names are used, but the references are quite obvious. It surprised me, though, that the least sympathetic character of the three is the one still living, the Conductor—though I may have to cut before their last scene together. He is played here by **Matthew Ball**; **Marcelino Sambé** is the cello, and **Lauren Cuthbertson** (for whom the ballet was created) dances the leading role.

21a Marston: *The Cellist* (2020), audition

22b — *The Cellist*, collapse

21c — continuation of the above (ONLY IF TIME; adds 2:30)

23. Elgar: *Enigma Variations* title

In 1899, an only moderately well-known composer from the West of England, **Edward Elgar** (1857–1934) made his name with a set of orchestral variations dedicated to “My friends pictured within,” otherwise known as the *Enigma Variations*, because Elgar indicated that the theme itself was a variant of another theme that he refused to identify. Anyway, I think this is a unique example of a set of portraits of people captured in the moment of composition. The score lists each by name, plus a short descriptive phrase. Of course, when **Sir Frederick Ashton** (1904–88) choreographed the piece for the Royal Ballet in 1968, all Elgar’s friends were long since dead, so the ballet has the air of a faded period photograph. But it is a *photograph*, that is the point; the people were all very much alive at the time it was taken. I played a bit of this last semester; this time, I am including a few more items. We shall see (1) the **opening** at Elgar’s country house, (2) the solo for the **composer’s wife**; then (3) after a cut, his boisterous friend **Arthur Troyte Griffith**, (4) the charming **Winifred Norbury**, together with the man who I think is hopelessly in love with her, Elgar’s publisher and closest friend **A. J. Jaeger**, and finally (5) the celebrated **Nimrod variation** in which the two share a quiet conversation about Beethoven, joined by the composer’s wife.

24. Ashton: *Enigma Variations*, opening and variations 1, 7, 8, 9

25. Class title 2 (A Family Matter)

C. The King Sings

26. Section title C (Philip II)

For the second hour, we turn to portraits in opera, four of them. The title is a misnomer, for three of the subjects are women: a nun, a playgirl, and a former slave. But it does refer to my first example, arguably the greatest piece we shall hear all day: the aria “Ella giammai m’amò” sung by **King Philip II of Spain** in *Don Carlo* (1884) by **Giuseppe Verdi** (1813–1901). For dynastic reasons, the twice-widowed King Philip has married the much younger **Elisabeth de Valois**, his son’s fiancée. Seen simply as a political maneuver, this makes perfect sense; what he did not take into account is the fact that the young couple had already fallen in love. In this scene from well on in the opera, he has been shown evidence of his wife’s continuing love for his son, which causes him to question the legacy he will leave behind when he is at last entombed in the Escorial. Operatic arias in general play the same purpose as soliloquies in Shakespeare, but this one is unusually deep in its penetration. The singer, from the old Met production, is **Ferruccio Furlanetto**. So is this a portrait? Does it change as the aria proceeds?

27. Verdi: *Don Carlo*, “Ella giammai m’amò” (Ferruccio Furlanetto)

28. Philip II and his wives at the Escorial

What did you think? A psychological portrait of a human being, or mere operatic artifice? Of course, this completely fails the test of a real-time encounter between artist and subject. Verdi, like **Friedrich Schiller**, the author of the play on which the opera is based, is a creature of the Romantic age, and may simply be reimagining the historical figures in terms of romantic love. But that is only the introduction! the last three quarters of the aria do something different.

D. Women, not Queens

29. Section title D (the three people below)

30. Harriet Tubman

We already have photographic portraits of **Harriet Tubman** (1823–1913), the escaped slave and lifelong activist who built the Underground Railroad. Tell me how you react to these pictures. For me, she comes over as driven and determined, iconic, and rather terrifying. But static. She must have had tremendous charisma, but I can only imagine it. Until I hear her sing, in the 2014 opera *Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed that Line to Freedom* by Nigerian-American composer **Nkeiru Okoye** (1972–). As sung here by **Janinah Burnett**, it simply blazes with energy. I may not be able to play the whole thing, but do tell me what it does for you, as compared to the still pictures.

31. Okoye: *Harriet Tubman*, excerpt

32. Janinah Burdett as Harriet Tubman

What did you think? The striking thing for me is the range and virtuosity of the song, and the soprano's total mastery in singing it. I get the sense that she is not so much singing music that is already written, but finding *new* music to express how she feels.

33. Sister Helen Prejean

Dead Man Walking by composer **Jake Heggie** (1961–) is a very rare occasion of an operatic portrait of a living person composed with the active participation of that person, and not long after the events it describes. **Sister Helen Prejean** is a Catholic nun, a sister of the order of the **Sisters of Saint Joseph of Medaille** in New Orleans. In 1982, she began a mission to death-row inmates at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola LA, becoming (at his request) the spiritual adviser to one of them in his last weeks. In 1993, she published the book *Dead Man Walking* as personal and spiritual account of her experiences, and the first salvo in a lifelong campaign to abolish the death penalty. In 1995, it became a feature film, and in shortly after that Heggie began work with the playwright **Terrence McNally** (1938–2020) as librettist to create their operatic version, which premiered in 2000. Near the beginning of the opera, Sister Helen stops on the way to the Angola Penitentiary to consider the journey she is making inside her soul and in the real world. Here is **Joyce DiDonato** singing the role at the Met last year.

34. Heggie: *Dead Man Walking*, “This journey”

35. Helen Prejean and Joyce DiDonato

36. Anna Nicole Smith

How do you paint a portrait of a person whose entire life was a self-constructed artifact, the projection of a media image of sex and success? Answer: you can't. *Anna Nicole*, the 2011 opera by **Mark-Anthony Turnage** (1960–) [to a libretto by **Richard Thomas** (1964–) who also wrote both words and music for *Jerry Springer, the Opera*] does not even try to look behind the glitz until the very end, when it might be too little too late. His heroine died of a drug overdose only a year before he started writing, so this is not a portrait of a living person. But it is the most “now” of all the pieces I have been playing, and very much a study of how media “portraits” get created in the modern age. I'll play part of the opening, then cut to that final scene. Anna Nicole is played by the Dutch soprano **Eva-Marie Westbroek**.

37. Turnage: *Anna Nicole*, opening (ONLY IF TIME; adds 3:00)

38. Turnage: *Anna Nicole*, continuation of the above

39. Turnage: *Anna Nicole*, final scene

40. Class title 3 (“Life as a Media Construct”)