

Estimating the Playing Time of a Shakespearean Text

By Scott Kaiser

To estimate the playing time of a Shakespearean text, for many years the Oregon Shakespeare Festival used the **Brubaker Method**—an equation devised by Ed Brubaker, who was an actor, stage manager and director with the Festival from 1955 to 1970.

Fine-tuned over many seasons in Ashland, Brubaker's equation, put forth in his self-published book *Shakespeare Aloud*, states that the total number of lines multiplied by .06 equals the show's estimated playing time in minutes.

Or, in equation form:

$$\text{Line Count} \times .06 = \text{Playing Time (in minutes)}$$

Several years ago, however, the Festival began generating its own Shakespearean texts using Microsoft Word, making it possible, with the click of a mouse, to know the exact number of words in a text. This, in turn, made it possible to estimate the playing time of a show based upon a *word* count, rather than a *line* count.

In the table below, I have compiled data from fourteen Shakespearean productions over the course of five seasons at OSF—productions that were presented in three different venues, and performed by hundreds of different actors, each with his or her own idiosyncratic rate of speaking.

In the table, "Word Count" includes all stage directions and speech headings in the text, and subtracts all cuts in the text made by the director during pre-production and rehearsals.

"Playing Time" includes all non-verbal stage business—such as fights, dances, and comic bits—but does not include intermission.

By dividing the word count for each production by the playing time in minutes (not including intermission), I calculated the *average speaking rate* for each production.

Then, by averaging the speaking rates of all fourteen productions, I was able to determine that at any given performance of a play by Shakespeare at OSF the text will generally be spoken at an average rate of approximately **135 words per minute**.

Here then, based on the data, is the **Kaiser Method** for estimating the playing time of a Shakespearean text, in equation form:

$$(\text{Word Count} \div 135) + \text{Intermission (in mins.)} = \text{Playing Time (in mins.)}$$

OSF Production	Word Count	Playing Time (in minutes)	Words per Minute
Henry V (2000)	21,662	155	140
Twelfth Night (2000)	21,383	142	151
Merry Wives of Windsor (2001)	21,158	169	126
The Tempest (2001)	16,074	125	129
As You Like It (2002)	22,400	170	132
Winter's Tale (2002)	26,186	173	152
Romeo and Juliet (2003)	17,155	140	123
Richard II (2003)	19,175	150	128
Antony and Cleopatra (2003)	20,418	155	132
Comedy of Errors (2004)	15,402	107	144
Henry VI, Part One (2004)	13,026	107	122
Henry VI, Parts Two & Three (2004)	20,053	157	128
King Lear (2004)	25,238	176	144
Much Ado About Nothing (2004)	21,415	153	140
Average Words per Minute:			135