

## Description for program

Analysis of Shakespearean performance in 1920 would probably discuss the design; analysis of Shakespearean performance in 2020 will discuss the casting. In preparation for this seminar, participants watched and discussed the Royal Shakespeare's 2019 production of *Taming of the Shrew* (Justin Audibert, dir.), The Globe's 2018 production of *Hamlet* (Federay Holmes & Elle While, dirs.), The Globe's 2019 production of *Richard II* (Adjoa Andoh and Lynette Linton, dirs.), and Forced Entertainment's *Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare*. During the seminar, we will share our analyses and discuss the potential stakes of the clear centrality of casting in productions of Shakespeare today.

Each participant engaged with the productions in different ways. A few of the ideas being worked on in this group include:

### Cary Mazer, "Reading Casting"

Based on the premise that, in theatre, everything is meaningful, including—especially—things that are not intended to be meaningful, I ponder the implications of the casting in the seminar's chosen test cases: how single-gender productions mark masculinity and femininity; how gender equitable productions leave anomalous and ambiguous non-gender-crossed characters; how signposts of region and class replace, but do not necessarily subvert, the problematic issues foregrounded by production's gendering; how race and gender intersect with disability; and ultimately whether we—as performance scholars—are unrepresentative of the larger demotic audience, and whether our quest for signification leads us to bring our own unconscious cultural frames and markers to productions which are asking us to set such frames and markers aside.

### W.B. Worthen, "Casting Things"

*Table Top Shakespeare* is strikingly of the moment, a moment in which both the conception of entanglement and the new materialism have worked to resituate both the notion of the human and of the agency of the object world, an agency revealed when objects break down their social contract, escape their technological affordance, become perhaps more menacing things. Founder of Forced Entertainment Tim Etchell suggests that *Table Top Shakespeare* perhaps participates in this recalibration of materialism, suggesting that the objects in play—the jars, canisters, salt shakers, and plastic cups that perform/stand in for/surrogate the "characters" of a narrated version of a Shakespeare play—enact "a kind of rudimentary ventriloquism, bringing life and voice to these supposedly dead things, but on another, the work taps the half-life that objects have anyway, their speechless speech, the traces of their action and purpose, their haunted existence." Etchell's comment suggests the extent to which casting is a technological process, perhaps more visibly here, but visible at any moment that a given body is rendered significant according to a discrete paradigm of representation, a paradigm that traces the multiplex interfaces between the physiological and the cultural, the entanglement, so to speak, of the object in the ideological networks of signification. How might we take Forced Entertainment's *Table Top Shakespeare* as a representation of theatre, a way of speaking to the technology of theatre, and particularly to its passing, perhaps obsolescing, ways of technologizing a (theatrical) human?

### Robert Shaughnessy, "Audio-description, diversity and Shakespeare performance"

My contribution stems from a developing collaboration between colleagues at GSA and the University of Surrey's Centre for Translation Studies, around the possibilities and challenges of audio description (AD) for theatrical performance. AD has traditionally been envisaged as an access tool for blind and partially sighted users that strives towards a 'neutrality' that has increasingly come

into question; in particular, there been a vigorous and sometimes fraught dialogue within the AD community around the normative, ableist and potentially racist values and assumptions that inform AD's approach to the physical appearance of cast members. The issue becomes especially acute when it intersects with the concerns of diversity casting: to what extent does AD 'see' or 'not see' race, and how does this relate to the problematic concept of so-called 'colour-blind' casting?

Valerie Clayman Pye, "Casting & Embodying Shylock"

I am interested in how this object-oriented Shylock represents any number of potential Shylocks, and how objectifying and animating Shylock in this way can lead audiences to insert meaning into the signifier, 'Shylock'. I'd like to consider Forced Entertainment's Tabletop *Merchant of Venice* alongside Karin Coonrod's 2016 production with Compagnia de' Colombari that featured five different Shylocks and marked the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formation of the Venetian Jewish ghetto and the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare's death. How does Coonrod's prismatic version of Shylock also help us to see the Shylockian possibilities that spur our empathy and understanding of the complex nature of character? How does the combination of objective fracture of identity in these two productions offer audiences a reading of Shylock that speaks to the contemporary moment, which is filled with increased antisemitism throughout the world?

Jenny Flaherty, "Performing Power: Gender-Swapping in Audibert's *Taming of the Shrew*"

In 2019, Justin Audibert used cross-gender casting in the RSC's production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, setting it in a world in which women hold power over men. Audibert's production changes the names and lines in the play to reflect a matriarchy that is the direct inverse of the patriarchy portrayed in Shakespeare's *Shrew*. By reversing rather than removing the power imbalances of the play, Audibert's production uses world-building to demonstrate that the play's inequities go beyond the Petruchio/Katherine relationship, which simply reveals and contextualizes broader societal inequities.

Amy Cook, "Speculative interiority"

The actors who perform Forced Entertainment's *Table Top Shakespeare* bring the world to life with their gestures. Their hands and eyes direct our attention, evoke our emotion, and signal conceptual ideas in the plays such that a spool of thread is mysterious and the death of a black vinegar bottle is heart-breaking. The specific casting both does and doesn't matter—the audience makes a knowing laugh when Brutus come's on as a small bottle of hot sauce but no such reaction greets Lady Macbeth's small painted vase—but the relationship between the objects matter: the objects belong to a category, a world, and that is more important than the whole. Second, what can we learn about storytelling, meaning-making, and joint attention by attending to the subtle gestures that bring the objects to life. Finally, given the obvious pleasure of the audience in recognizing the text through the story, how might the performance feel different if we think about it as a fan vid of Shakespeare's works?

Andrew Hartley, "The casting dodge"

I'm interested in the extent to which we use non traditional casting of various kinds to avoid wrestling with the inherent suitability (or even quality) of some problematic plays and whether, far from refashioning Shakespeare, such an approach reifies old ideas about textuality, universality and timelessness which we pretend to have rejected. I'm also interested in the way that quirky casting becomes an excuse for poorly worked out ideas, directorial sloppiness and other theatrical inadequacy which we would not accept in drama by other writers, and by how certain kinds of

"conceptual" casting (in the non Alan Dessen sense) close off more rigorous discussion of the production's specifics.

Miranda Fay Thomas, "Casting, Stock Characters, Audience Cogniton/Recognition"