

Seminar 26, Performance During Pandemic – Shakespeare and Covid (Abstracts)

Gemma Kate Allred, Université de Neuchâtel

“‘For never was a story brighter yet/Than this of Romeo and his Juliet’: Illusions of Autonomy in Creation Theatre’s *Romeo and Juliet*”

This paper will consider online performances of Shakespeare in lockdown. My focus will be on the new performance opportunities offered during the pandemic, in particular how interactive, immersive digital theatre affords audience members autonomy and control over their viewing experience. Creation Theatre’s 2021 production of *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Natasha Rickman, offered a hybrid approach to digital theatre, placing live theatre performed via Zoom alongside pre-recorded ‘choose your own adventure’ style gameplay via a website.

Audiences pledged allegiance to either the Montagues or Capulets and joined their chosen family on a Zoom call ahead of the Capulet Ball. Through audience polls and breakout rooms, audience members acting collectively could influence the production, watching choices made play out in real time. Following his death, Mercutio then took on the role of Fate, inviting the audience to be ‘Such stuff as dreams are made on’ and guide Romeo and Juliet’s journey. A textual change to the Prologue’s ‘A pair of star-cross’d lovers may take their life’ offered a tantalising suggestion that our lovers could be spared the death of Shakespeare’s text.

Leaving the interactive Zoom call, audience members then made a series of choices to decide which of several pairs of pre-recorded videos to watch next. These decisions allowed a number of different versions of Romeo and Juliet to play out, including the chance to save the lovers – albeit only via one of the tracks. Live-action interactivity was built into this experience through QR codes which gave access to live video calls and phone conversations with actors, who offered sonnets and speeches from other plays as well as in-character improvisation. With only occasional glimpses of fellow audience members, this closing section of the journey was an individual one, with audience members influencing only their own experience.

Taking Creation’s *Romeo and Juliet* as a case study, this paper will place audiences at its core as it engages with questions of autonomy, interactivity and what constitutes live theatre in a hybrid context.

Benjamin Broadribb, Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham

“The ‘new depthiness’ of Hamlet(s) in Lockdown”

My paper focuses upon three adaptations of *Hamlet* created and performed online during the COVID-19 pandemic: an episode of Elliot Barnes-Worrell’s Instagram series *Thinking Out Loud: Quarantine Shakespeare*, released in April 2020;¹ an episode of the web series *Shakespeare Republic: #AllTheWebsAStage (The Lockdown Chronicles)* directed by Sally McLean, released in September 2020;² and *The Show Must Go Online*’s production, directed by Rob Myles, performed live via Zoom and streamed to YouTube in August 2020.³ All three adaptations are infused with the cultural moment of

¹ Available online: <https://www.instagram.com/tv/B-81BsH7Nn/>

² Available online: <https://www.facebook.com/ShakespeareRepublic/videos/613287789352362/>

³ Available online: <https://youtu.be/QIDkPcYdSG0>

lockdown: performed at home by isolated individuals using domestically sourced props and costumes, and streamed or recorded using smartphones, laptops and video conferencing software.

It is my assertion that digital performances and adaptations of Shakespeare created during the pandemic regularly offer examples of metamodernism, which has been put forward as the dominant cultural logic of the opening decades of the twenty-first century, succeeding late twentieth-century postmodernism. Cultural theorist Timotheus Vermeulen argues that a key feature of the metamodern sensibility is a 'new depthiness',⁴ in contrast to the 'new depthlessness'⁵ which characterised postmodern works. Hamlet is a character who has regularly been depthlessly (de)constructed in modern popular culture through caricatured tropes and memetic afterlives. Adapted and performed during the pandemic, my paper argues that Hamlet gained a metamodern 'depthiness' in the productions of Barnes-Worrell, McLean and Myles, as creatives explored the character's affective potential anew.

Méline Dumot, ENS Université de Lyon

"Re-thinking and re-shaping the audience's role: spectatorship during the Covid-19 pandemic"

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit and theatres closed, it seemed difficult to imagine how spectators would still participate in theatrical experiences. However, very quickly, numerous productions were offered online, ranging from Zoom productions to pre-existing archives being broadcast online (NTLive, Shakespeare's Globe). Some productions were offered for free, others cost the price of a usual ticket. Shakespeare's plays seemed to occupy a central place, as many productions of the Bard's plays were made available to online audiences. These productions raise many questions related to digital studies, accessibility, and liveness, among others. Being a spectator during the pandemic is also a crucial topic. What does it mean to be part of an audience online? What is the role of the spectator in these kinds of productions?

This paper will investigate what kinds of relationship were built with the audience during the pandemic. Do digital playgoers form a community? Is a form of communication possible between actors and spectators when the show goes online? I will explore how, in the absence of a shared physical venue, audiences could still express reactions to the plays they were watching. Many options were available to watch plays from home. Some theatres sold a specific number of tickets, and the production was only accessible during performance time, as in a pre-Covid-19 theatrical event. Thus, they were more ephemeral than other types of productions, broadcast for free on YouTube for instance, accessible with no time limit. I argue that these different conditions imply different reception practices, and my goal is to look closely at the different ways of being a playgoer that emerged during the years 2020 and 2021.

My work will compare the different ways performances were made available, from pre-recorded performances to interactive productions on Zoom, such as The Creation Theatre's *Tempest* and see how they question and re-shape our usual definitions of audiences. I will also present the results of a survey I conducted in November 2021, trying to assess the practices of the Shakespearean spectators during the pandemic. I will wonder if and how online productions included their audiences. Does watching a play in

⁴ Vermeulen, Timotheus (2015) 'The New "Depthiness"', in *e-flux journal*, issue 61. Available online: <<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/61/61000/the-new-depthiness/>> [accessed 25 October 2021]

⁵ Jameson, Fredric (1991) *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 6.

one's living-room bring the spectators closer to the play, or farther away from it? Audience participation is a central point in my investigation: lockdown productions allowed spectators to become actors themselves, to ask actors questions, or to learn more about the context and history of the play they were watching. Multiple acts of spectatorship usually impossible in theatrical venues were allowed through online performances: reading the play at the same time, pausing, reviewing a specific passage, talking with other viewers, or commenting the performance on social media while it happened. Some have considered online performances as a parenthesis, which would quickly come to an end with theatres reopening. However, studying the reception of these performances shows that online productions also extended the range of actions available to spectators. This will lead me to reflect on the new potentialities that the Covid-19 pandemic opened in terms of spectatorship and audience's engagement with Shakespeare's plays.

Brent Griffin, Resurgens Theatre Company

“While there dies one a week / O' the plague’: Producing Jonson’s *The Alchemist* during a Pandemic”

As innumerable commentators have noted, our current pandemic is not unlike the plagues that ravaged Europe during the early modern period. Perhaps it is only natural then to look toward writers of the era in an effort to gain insight from their experiences. And though there are many fine candidates from which to choose, Shakespeare remains the go-to for all things Elizabethan (and Jacobean, for that matter). Remarkably, the same governing dynamic that dominates the academy (and its sizable publishing apparatus), as well as playhouses worldwide, also dictates our choice of the early modern lens through which we analyze global catastrophe. Indeed, Shakespeare's status as the premier cultural paradigm for “not [only] an age, but for all time” continues to influence our institutionalized understanding of Renaissance drama—even, it seems, during times of crisis. In the case of COVID, though, we may be better served by searching elsewhere for answers. Though occasionally employed as a poetic device or minor plot detail, Shakespeare does not write about widespread pestilence and its immediate effect on the community. Ben Jonson, however, does. Easily one of his most anthologized works, *The Alchemist* begins by framing its narrative specifically around a disease-infested London. Many parallels can be drawn between Jonson's “venture tripartite,” who exploit societal unrest in order to dupe the misinformed and gullible, and our present day pundits of mistrust and mass distortion. But such connectives are beyond the scope of this paper. I will instead chronicle the efforts of Resurgens Theatre Company's production of *The Alchemist*, which was filmed in November 2020 (and funded by the University of Alabama, the University of Southern Mississippi, and the Mississippi Humanities Council), and offer insights gained during a rehearsal process and filming schedule that was influenced considerably by SAG-AFTRA COVID protocols—in short, an account of a play about the plague produced during a plague.

Musa Gurnis, Baruch College/Bedlam Theatre

“*BEDLAM*: Making Shakespeare Pop Culture Again”

In 2020 when we could no longer make theater because of the coronavirus, Eric Tucker, the Artistic Director of Bedlam Theatre, invited me to collaborate with him on a project that would bring the

innovative sensibility with which his experimental off-Broadway company stages Shakespeare into a genuinely popular medium: television.

The plot of *BEDLAM* twists together the stories of *King Lear* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in a gritty small-time crime world. Folding together Shakespeare's characters gave new dimensions to their lives. We combined Kent with Frank Ford, and Gloucester with George Page, so that the scenes from *King Lear* show the men at work while the *Merry Wives* plot explores their problems at home. While our series takes great freedom with Shakespeare's plays, we also drew heavily on key features of Shakespeare's dramaturgy. Juxtaposing plots gives *BEDLAM* the tonal variety so distinctive to Shakespeare, swerving from low-life con men plotting in the urinals to moments of strange magic. In melding the self-interested scammer Falstaff with the faithful Fool we were developing one of Shakespeare's most innovative techniques for creating the illusion of interiority: characters who behave in contradictory ways seem more like real people.

While *King Lear* and *Merry Wives* form the core of the expanded plot, our series incorporates dialogue from fifteen other plays and a dozen poems. This pastiche script underscores how deeply Shakespeare's plays speak to each other, exploring different versions of conflicts between parents and children, rulers and subjects. Combining theatergrams from multiple sources in a new arrangement creates something like the experience of repertory, in which the previous roles of actors inform their current characters. The insertion of contemporary slang tricks the ears of the audience, making the verse sound as natural as modern speech. In this spirit, Edmund (Ryan Quinn) delivers his "bastardy" monologue as a stand-up comedy act. Rev. Evans's double entendre heavy Latin lesson becomes a masturbatory Zoom call. We invited the composer Ahmond to set a half-dozen sonnets to new music in contemporary genres—country, hip hop, post-punk—embedded diageetically in the dive bar open mic nights, car radios, and singing telegrams of tawdry Windsor City.

We wanted to give viewers a version of Shakespeare in which they could recognize themselves. Audiences, particularly younger viewers, feel more seen and spoken to when somebody soliloquizing looks like them. Pitching our series to networks such as Netflix, we stressed the value of inclusive, color-conscious casting that invites audiences to see themselves in the stories they watch without perpetuating damaging stereotypes. To counter the straightwashing so pervasive in modern productions of Shakespeare we filled Windsor City with queer people, regendering roles to match the identities of performers, and reimagining Dover as a queer squat full of teen runaways, a reparative place of mutual aid and chosen family where love takes up what is cast away. *BEDLAM* treats Shakespeare as a raw and malleable piece of shared culture available for use. Our series refashions Shakespeare's plays for post-Trump America. It is a show about narcissists with power; about how abusive dynamics within families are inflicted on the outside world; about the divide between those who look after others and those who look out for themselves. In *BEDLAM*, the people of Windsor City struggle with the same questions that are keeping most of the country up at night: Where will you go if you lose your home? If you get sick who will care for you?

Ronan Hatfull, University of Warwick

"Maybe It's Spyneline: Community, Dramaturgy and Shakespop in Lockdown"

In May 2020, I co-founded the theatre collective Partners Rapt Read Plays. Members of the group participate in weekly play readings on Zoom. Although these have included plays by Francis Beaumont,

Aphra Behn, Christopher Marlowe, the Reduced Shakespeare Company and Oscar Wilde, the collective predominantly focuses on Shakespeare, having read twenty-six of his thirty-seven plays to date. I developed this initiative in response to the UK's first Covid-19 lockdown to provide professional and amateur theatre-makers and performers with creative opportunities.

I am responsible for conceptual design and dramaturgy and have also regularly participated as an actor and musician. As the ensemble grew increasingly confident with the medium of Zoom as a vessel for online performance, so the weekly meetings metamorphosed from readthroughs into conceptualised performances, combining improvisation, physical comedy and live music. The group also celebrated significant holidays together, such as Christmas, New Year's Eve and Valentine's Day, though particular texts, building a sense of community in the tradition of amateur theatre.

A principal feature of each performance has been the application of a theme to a specific text. This artistic direction has resulted in a number of mashups between Shakespeare and popular culture, including the Bond-themed "Spybeline", a dino-tragedy "Jurassic Lear" that was subsequently adapted for theatre company Spymonkey's *Festival of Broken Stupid Ideas*, and "Henry the Thorth", which drew on allusions to *Henry IV Part 1* already apparent in Kenneth Branagh's 2011 superhero film *Thor*. This paper will deliver critical reflections on this dramaturgical process, the inversion of generic conventions, and how I drew on connections between Shakespeare and contemporary cinema to produce theatre made for lockdown.

Nathanial Hodes, Bentley University

"Keeping Company with Prospero/a in Pandemic Performance"

This paper will explore how pandemic-era performances reflected on the complicated notions of company and assembly under lockdown by focusing on productions of *The Tempest*—not only one of the most widely performed plays of the lockdown phase of the pandemic, but also a play chosen in many cases for its opportunities to represent different modes of isolation and, by extension, gathering and companionship. Much of the professional discourse and academic studies of lockdown performance that have been published so far focus heavily on the audience from two practical standpoints—the question of how (and how much) to attract and charge spectators to satisfy financial exigencies and build or retain a future audience base, and the largely technological question of how to engage audience members to achieve a mediated equivalent of liveness (e.g., Aebischer and Nicholas 2020; Iacobuțu 2020; Kalinowska et al 2021). Systematic treatment of social-emotional dimensions of what it means (or rather meant, considering that online performance has quickly dissipated) to "come together" as a company of actors or as an audience in the space of a virtual theater under the pressure of a public health crisis, is only beginning to emerge. Kai Padberg (2021), for instance, documents productions that constitute their audience identity without a "bodily co-presence" via commitments to activity, focus, collaboration, and either a textual or visual presence. Many of the *Tempest* adaptations this paper reviews, including those by Creation Theatre, Shakespeare on Draught, Open Dance Project, and Tender Claws adopted similar strategies. These productions draw attention to the romantic, quarrelsome, and devious synergies of characters meeting up and pairing off, often implicating the audience in these unions, via such strategies. Through these scenes, the productions explore the regenerative and especially degenerative impulses of being in small company away from the swarm of a larger human population for a sustained time. This paper plans to examine a sampling of such moments in detail, as

well as to ask the broader question of what happens to the idea of the body when physical co-presence is no longer integral to liveness.

Alfredo Michel Modenessi, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
The Translator's Basics for the New York Public Theater *Romeo y Julieta*

These basics stem from a curious coincidence starting in early 2020, already “under pandemic”. By August of *Annus horribilis* 1, I had been twice asked to share my translation of *Romeo and Juliet* into Spanish, made in 2017 for a Mexican production, to be used as the basis of two *bilingual* adaptations in the USA. At first, there was hope that both would be staged in conventional ways. Unfortunately, they were not. However, a year and a half later both have been unconventionally performed.

The first project, starting in early 2020, became a playscript now registered as *Dos familias*, put together by Joseph Falocco—from The University of Texas San Marcos—and myself, on the basis of Shakespeare's text and my translation. *Dos familias* premiered in mid-2020 and is slated for live performance by CFC Arts of Tampa at the annual SAA Meeting on April 6 2022 in Jacksonville. Soon after, the second project, called and promoted by its Spanish name: *Romeo y Julieta*, was proposed and eventually produced by the New York Public Theater as a podcast—an endeavor closer to an old-fashioned radio play than to the multimedia initiatives that the pandemic seems to invite. Special attention became imperative regarding the specifically acoustic aspects involved, and this, in turn, placed additional demands on myself, the translator. *Romeo y Julieta* aired on March 18 2021 and will remain available from the NYPT website until March 18 2022.

The main difference between *Romeo y Julieta* and *Dos familias* is that in the NYPT podcast the households are not differentiated on the basis of language—and thereby of nationality and/or identity. These notes dwell on the basic challenges and decisions that this dramaturgical choice presented to me, a translator with the sudden task of adapting his primordial version for voices meant to employ both his acquired and native tongues in loving sync *and* conflict, often at top speed; voices, moreover, born, developed, and trained within aural spheres significantly like and *unlike* my own.

Erin Sullivan, Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham
“What's past is prologue: pandemic Shakespeares and beyond”

My paper comes from the conclusion to my current book project, which explores the impact of digital technology on the theatrical performance of Shakespeare's plays. The book looks at the rise of theatre live broadcasting, intermedial performance methods, and born-digital adaptations over the course of the 2010s, when the rise of smartphone culture and ubiquitous computing thoroughly reshaped experiences of community, global communication, and self-performance in many people's everyday lives. In the introduction to my book, I look at three examples of digitally intensive performances of Shakespeare from this period and explore how their reception highlights three persistent complaints about such work: that its central motivation is commercial, that it empties the life out of a fundamentally live art form, and that it pursues novelty at the cost of all else.

In my conclusion, I return to these debates and consider what the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the forms of theatre that developed during it, has added to this discussion. Looking at

another trio of productions—Internationaal Theater Amsterdam’s live streaming and social media augmentation of Ivo van Hove’s much-feted *Roman Tragedies*, Creation Theatre’s choose-your-own-adventure-style *Romeo and Juliet*, and the Royal Shakespeare Company’s mixed reality *Dream*—I explore three principles that I think will be central to successful digital performances of the future: convergence, interaction, and hybridity. Like *Roman Tragedies*, such productions will find ways to travel across media platforms and in doing so connect with wider, more participatory audiences (à la Jenkins’s convergence culture); like *Romeo and Juliet*, they will experiment with ways to enact moments of interactive, consequential presence with audience members, though perhaps not always in the ways initially imagined; and like *Dream*, they will help audiences grapple with what it means to live a digitally hybrid life, in both the theatre and beyond.

Emily Yates, Michigan State University

“Think you know theatre? Think again’: Creation Theatre’s Experimental and Innovative Zoom Productions of *The Tempest* and *Romeo and Juliet*”

This paper looks at Creation Theatre’s 2020 production of *The Tempest* and 2021 production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Both utilized the web conferencing platform Zoom to bring theatre to audiences across the globe during the COVID-19 pandemic. I argue that the incorporation of immersive and interactive theatrical elements in each production uniquely engaged audiences and reflect Shakespeare’s own interest in adaptation and experimentation. Transformations of the digital screen and experimentations with the experience of the audience informed both productions. *The Tempest* included an Ariel who would directly address the audience, asking, for example, for audience members to bring fruits and treats in front of their camera to tempt the “men of sin” during the harpy scene. *Romeo and Juliet* utilized zoom breakout rooms, interlaid live video feeds of individual performers, as well as a “choose-your-own-adventure” format in the second half where audiences could click on buttons to make choices for characters. Looking at the plays and productions together, I analyze the evolution of Creation Theatre’s utilization of Zoom, argue how *The Tempest* and *Romeo and Juliet* are apt choices for Zoom adaptations, and consider the benefits and limitations of using Zoom in presenting Shakespeare. Bringing together studies of digital Shakespeare and performance, I show how these two productions allow the audience to help shape the narrative. In this way, Creation Theatre’s zoom productions show a transformation of the meanings and possibilities of theatre itself.