

Virtual Seminar 4: Performance during Pandemic – Shakespeare and Covid (Abstracts)

Betsy Sullivan Ahmad, University of Southern California

“These Visions: RSC’s Virtual Midsummer *Dream*”

On March 16th, 2021, I attended the Royal Shakespeare Company’s production of *Dream* with friends spanning nine time zones, and each of us immersed ourselves in the “virtual midsummer forest” from our own homes. *Dream*, a motion-captured, interactive and live performance, was produced at the Guildhall in Portsmouth, UK, a venue with a capacity of 2,200 people, and yet I joined over 7,000 audience members to watch the adaptation of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Perhaps most remarkable is that the performance was free to all those who wanted to watch and listen, and participants who wished to interact remotely and “light Puck’s way with fireflies” could pay a £10 donation. The RSC collaborated with Marshmallow Laser Feast, a London-based virtual reality/augmented reality studio, and the Philharmonia Orchestra in order to create an enchanted forest on the edge of destruction. *Dream* offered a momentary balm from the stresses of pandemic lockdown life, to be certain; additionally, the RSC preserved audience interaction despite the distance and developed a democratized way of broadcasting live performance.

Thea Buckley, Queen’s University Belfast

“Exit, pursued by a volcano, LOL’: Sharing streaming Shakespeare via chatspaces, #LAVA and other social media in a time of social distancing”

‘Socially-distanced performance’ is an oxymoron for a form meant to be both watched and shared in company, and the pandemic’s rupturing of our collective wellbeing and spatio-temporal rhythms also brought home sharply just how social the act of Shakespearean theatre is designed to be. New forms of social interactivity have arisen to mediate the swiftly substituted online versions of live, recorded or revisited digital Shakespeares; the paper takes its title from a recent memorable online watch party of the BFI’s 1913 *Winter’s Tale*, where the infamous bear is substituted for a particularly static and clearly more manageable if inanimate volcano.

The paper draws on my personal experience, from the earliest disoriented days of lockdown, solo in Belfast, when I attended a performance of *Macbeth* by local Big Telly Theatre now livestreamed over something called Zoom. At the start, the audience was encouraged to locate ourselves by writing a sign reading ‘Belfast’ etc. and when summoned, to wave these sociably over our cameras to other darkened living rooms. Even as the performance became hypersocial -- multiple faces remained staring back at us throughout with ‘audience view’, while the individual, permanently-on character cameras eliminated any offstage mystery -- Macbeth’s own besieged isolation and claustrophobia became suddenly that much more relatable. Within the month, to better serve their audiences’ social needs, streamed Shakespeare became the new normal: theatres opened their digital archives, and I made and shared my new site guide to these: <https://shakespearestreams.wordpress.com/>

In exploring several steps along the rapid 2020-21 evolution of shared, streaming Shakespeare during Covid, this paper focuses on the strategies adopted by theatrical companies or institutions as well as their audiences to serve social needs or ends, in discussing logistical, economic, sociopolitical, ideological and other issues raised by new modes of interactive, digitally mediated Shakespearean

performance. My paper engages with the newly popular phenomenon of both curated and independent audience interactions surrounding streamed Shakespeare, interactions that take place via social and digital media during these online Shakespeare productions whether live or recorded/deferred, primarily via shared chatspaces.

In examining these online observations and queries as representing a new layer of interactivity, the paper first looks at these as the porous virtual fourth wall created by enabled YouTube chat channel functions during streamed theatre premieres, specifically the worldwide audience comments recorded during the online 'NT at Home' re-release of Simon Godwin's 2017 *Twelfth Night* for the England's National Theatre (starring Tamsin Grieg as 'Malvolia'). The second part of the paper examines these audience interactions as an added floating layer, a new fifth wall facilitating extra-dimensional interactivity via non-commercial online 'watch parties', looking at collective, socially-mediated synchronized / desynchronized public / private viewings with interactive comment threads, such as

Gemma Allred and Ben Broadribb's co-curated #LAVA live-Tweeted Shakespeare series (*Live Art, Virtual Audience*), or the virtual British Shakespeare Association Conference timetabled events complemented by invite-only virtual hangouts on Kumospace hosted by conference chair Maria Shmygol, with multiple breakout miniature replica conference social-discussion rooms, complete with tiny avatars, furniture, and virtual drinks.

Ultimately, the paper questions whether socially-shared, streamed Shakespeare can ever replicate, substitute for or even enhance the experience of in-person performance, whether serving the goals of theatres such as Big Telly in a period of extended dark, or meeting the increased social and entertainment needs of their audiences -- as one YouTube wag put it: "Dost thou think because we are on lockdown, there shall be no more cakes and ale?"

Thomas Cartelli, Muhlenberg College
"Rethinking Liveness as Aliveness in Big Telly's *Macbeth*"

Given the resumption of live theater performance in many parts of the globe, the deployment of Zoom as a performance medium is already in decline and likely to disappear altogether. Hence, rather than marking a transitional moment in live and/or recorded theatrical production, the Zoom platform may merely occupy a provisional or fallback position in any future economy of performance and reception transactions. That said, the number, quality, resourcefulness, and frequent aliveness of even entirely recorded performances enabled and mediated by the Zoom platform, and the ability of the medium to help socially distanced individuals inhabit (however briefly) virtual communities during the pandemic, suggests that future space may well be afforded for theater practitioners to develop newer, technically adept strategies to make Zoom theater less of an ephemeral, provisional phenomenon and more of a creative alternative to conventional in-person, digital, or cinematic production. Unlike most theater performances created and distributed via the Zoom platform during the Covid-19 lockdown, the Big Telly *Macbeth* (2020) directed by Zoe Seaton, though reliant on a series of pre-recorded sequences, was presented live and integrated the spotlighted reactions of its self-selected auditors to its five performers who, like the auditors, were effectively spotlighting themselves from the privacy of their own homes. As a rather singular case in comparison with other fully recorded Zoom lockdown productions that were transmitted on demand, Big Telly's *Macbeth's* may prompt one to ask what difference live performance and live transmission make. But the question itself involves conflating a performance condition with a

performance effect. As we shall see, the interruptive shifts between the often seamless editing of its live and recorded sequences, the occasional roughness of its face-on presentational style, and its generally awkward embedding of live auditors in its virtual performance space contribute an *effect of aliveness* that obviates the search for residual indicators of live performance in the production's fully recorded iteration.

Susan L. Fischer, Bucknell University

"Following Puck through the RSC's Virtual Forest in *Dream: Live Theatre and High-tech Innovations*"

The Royal Shakespeare Company's thirty-minute streamed forest scenes from *A Midsummer Night's*, titled *Dream*, fused live performance with motion-capture technology, 3-D graphics, and interactive gaming techniques, and let the audience remotely guide Puck through a virtual forest.

If, for audiences watching in a residence, the virtual fairies moving through a digital forest looked more like a video game or a computer generated blockbuster than the average Royal Shakespeare Company show, the performances were delivered live and in real time. Every one of the eight performances was unique. This *Dream* was not a full-scale production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; rather, it was a narrative inspired by it, focusing on Puck and the fairies.

Whatever one's individual response to the experiment, one thing is clear: this *Dream* represents a new format for Shakespeare performance that has *evolved* during (rather than emerged from) this period of pandemic, demonstrating that existing technologies can be adapted to the demands of particular moments of a play.

Christopher D. Foley, University of Southern Mississippi

"(How) Must the Show go on?"

Given that the American Shakespeare Center's Blackfriars Playhouse in Staunton, VA, is one of two prominent architectural reconstructions of Jacobean indoor theatres, ASC performances at the Blackfriars have long offered scholars unique insight into the staging potentialities and performative dimensions of popular Renaissance plays. Rather than explore the archive of ASC's past on-stage performances, however, this paper will examine the ASC's series of off-stage business-model adaptations during the early (and later) stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since mid-March 2020, the ASC has canceled multiple theatrical seasons, pivoted more than once to an online streaming service for theatre patrons in a different but related medium ("Blackfriars TV"), and, most intriguingly, moved in the direction of a troupe-directed model of operations after parting ways with artistic director Ethan McSweeney this past February. How might the ASC's series of pandemic-induced pivots help us think through the crippling economic constraints, adaptive capacities, and entrepreneurial ingenuity of playwrights, players, and troupes during the numerous plague outbreaks that plagued London's commercial theater industry during the 16th and 17th centuries?

Sarah Higinbotham, Oxford College of Emory University

"'If All Obstacles Were Cut Away': Shakespeare-in-Prison Network's Quarantine Summer"

Those of us who facilitate Shakespeare inside prisons are well-acquainted with obstacles: security protocols limit our materials, incarcerated student-actors face arbitrary stints in solitary confinement and prison transfers, programming can be interrupted, paused, or cancelled when prisons are short-staffed, and our communication is constrained solely to the few hours a week we spend together inside prisons. But it works. Prison Shakespeare productions and discussions flourish across the U.S. and throughout the world, bringing actors, professors, and people serving time in prison into meaningful human contact with each other.

COVID-19, of course, brought more obstacles. In March of 2020, all prison programming froze as the Department of Justice quarantined prison and jail populations from any outside contact, including family visitation and, of course, Shakespeare classes and rehearsals. Many of us were able to continue programming via an exchange of materials. Others lost all proximity with their students inside prison. For those of us who had known the immense human gratification that Shakespeare in Prison fosters—both to incarcerated people and those of us who teach and direct—the loss was immense.

So in lieu of crossing boundaries between Shakespeare and prisons, the Shakespeare in Prison Network (SiPN) created another kind of boundary-crossing: they hosted Zoom plays throughout the lockdown summer of 2020, bringing together people in the U.S. and the UK who teach and direct Shakespeare inside prisons. We became fellow actors in Shakespeare Zoom plays. Instead of making our way through concertina wire fences and sally ports, we appeared and disappeared in our Zoom boxes. Instead of connecting with our incarcerated students, we connected with each other. Instead of using Shakespeare to navigate the criminal justice system's obstacles, the SiPN Zoom plays circumvented the obstacles of a COVID-lockdown and enacted the power of proximity.

Richard III imagines if his “path were even to the crown” and “if all obstacles were cut away” (3.7.155-56). But in fact, extensive research demonstrates that obstacles make us more creative. (Richard's uneven path and obstacles did not stop him!)

More specifically, studies have shown that obstacles and constraints elicit heightened global processing, allowing people to successfully grasp the larger picture (and are subsequently more satisfied, and even happier). As someone who has been teaching Shakespeare inside Georgia's prisons for 14 years, I can attest that my own participation in SiPN Shakespeare plays helped me see the “big picture” of Shakespeare's role in social justice work, allowing me to return to the prisons more creative, determined, and enthusiastic.

In this essay, I will explore the ways that the SiPN 2020 Zoom plays instantiated what, in fact, we see Shakespeare doing inside prisons: the power of Shakespeare to erase boundaries, to influence performance in all areas of life, to enrich sensory experiences, and to enhance creativity.

Erin Minear, College of William & Mary

“Where the Infectious Pestilence Did Reign’: *Romeo and Juliet* during the Pandemic”

In my paper I will be examining two prominent London productions of *Romeo and Juliet* that both came into being during the pandemic. The first is the National Theatre film produced for television, starring Josh O'Connor and Jessie Buckley and directed by Simon Godwin. The production was filmed in the National's Lyttelton theater and in backstage spaces when the theatres in London were closed because of the pandemic, and premiered on PBS on April 23, 2021 in the USA. The second is the *Romeo and Juliet*

from Shakespeare's Globe, starring Alfred Enoch and Rebekah Murrell and directed by Ola Ince. This production was performed for a live audience in summer 2021 (though with some adjustments and precautions in response to the pandemic) and also was streamed through various outlets.

Romeo and Juliet was a popular pandemic choice for multiple reasons, including the fact that the fatal letter meant to inform Romeo of Juliet's faked death is never delivered when the bearer is placed under quarantine. Both productions explicitly offer themselves as a response to the moment: the National Theatre's film exists in its current form because of Covid, while the Globe's production focused on the "sickness" of Verona society, and on the struggles and mental health of young people trying to navigate a broken system.

My essay will explore the way each production responded to the conditions of the pandemic in both formal and thematic terms. The questions that I will be asking include: How are touch, closeness, and distance emphasized or de-emphasized in these productions? To what degree do the productions respond to the social justice issues thrown into relief by the pandemic? Do these productions treat the familiar and "classic" content as a comforting tradition, or do they seek to present something startlingly new?

Gretchen Minton, Montana State University

"In a time of Covid, Shakespeare was for the Birds"

Montana InSite Theatre (MIST) was born out of the needs of 2020, when people were unable to gather in traditional locations to share in the pleasures and comforts of performance art. MIST's outdoor productions feature material by Shakespeare and others in order to foster intellectual and emotional engagement with the challenges of our time, especially the trauma of the pandemic and solastalgia. The first of these productions, "Shakespeare's Walking Story" (performed at Story Mill Park in Bozeman, Montana, in June 2020) dealt with the theme of imprisonment. Audience members made it clear that this impactful production served an important need in the community, inspiring subsequent artistic projects.

In June of 2021, MIST returned to the same park to present "Shakespeare for the Birds." Guides led small groups along paths of the bird sanctuary where strategically placed actors performed Shakespeare scenes and songs related to the avian world. However, "Shakespeare for the Birds" was more than just a summertime walk in the park, over the well-trodden ground of Shakespeare's engagement with the avian world. The selected scenes and passages were freely adapted and stitched together from Shakespearean sources; painters and musicians demonstrated original work; and poetry from Theodore Roethke and Marc Beaudin was also showcased as part of this experience.

As an applied theatre project, "Shakespeare for the Birds" had an environmental orientation, encouraging audience members to listen to biological references in the words they heard, yet also to sounds of the park's more-than-human inhabitants, whose frequent interventions became part of the production's soundscape. At the same time, "Shakespeare for the Birds" raised social justice issues, as the full-circle return of the walk concluded with a meditation upon avian extinction and the genocide of the Lakota people.

The mood of 2021 was markedly different from 2020 when it came to post-pandemic hope in regeneration, alternative theatrical modes, and community connections. "Shakespeare for the Birds" was thus not only a meditation upon lost species and lost lives, but also an homage to the resiliency of our planet's ecosystems and social systems.

Scott Russell, Queen's University Belfast

"The Ongoing Socio-Political Significance of Hamlet During the Pandemic"

This seminar paper explores how several recent productions of Hamlet, from 2020 to 2022, resonate with and echo the socio-political experience of the Covid-19 pandemic via directorial technique, performance, different modes of reception, and elements of spectatorship. While the numerous lockdowns, and the mental and material anguish that comes with them, have been a struggle for most, Hamlet seems to have been performed or broadcast in a variety of ways as a metatheatrical salve. The experience of a character undergoing devastating levels of change inside the prison-like castle of Elsinore is enough to resonate with audiences in and of itself.

Sean Mathias, director of the 2021 version of Hamlet for the Theatre Royal in Windsor, starring Ian McKellen in the title role, has acknowledged that

We live in a time where we re-define the abstract and the literal. We live in a time of immense confusion. And as we question the absolutism of the literal, we have a serious responsibility to define that alternative we are seeking. Perhaps Hamlet and his confusion and desperate quest to do the right thing, to seek out the only truth can help to find the "US" we are looking for.

Perhaps 'Hamlet'...with its iconoclastic attitudes will help us understand theatre in this new age; understand our lives as they now unfold.

This striking quote epitomises this piece's hypothesis: that Hamlet, with its long and storied history, has found a new outlet. It can capture the essence of Covid-19 in ongoing spades. McKellen's Hamlet, with his hoodies and his tracksuit bottoms, gains significance when watched during this time. The morally corrupt Claudius, and the short, yet not sweet, funeral at the beginning, and simple activity of getting a haircut while reciting "to be or not to be" resonate as pandemic iconography. The world of Hamlet, a place of existential dread, psychological pauses, and claustrophobia, has never felt so apparent.

This piece will examine Mathias' work in detail, while acknowledging that it is just one of several productions to have been performed during this period, including works by Sean Holmes for the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse (2021-2), and Greg Hersov for the Young Vic theatre in London (2021). While these productions each have value as plays performed during the pandemic, it would be remiss to leave out the numerous versions from years past that were streamed for lockdown viewing from spring 2020 to summer 2021. Versions starring Andrew Scott (2018), Benedict Cumberbatch (2015), and David Tennant (2008), to name but a few, were added to streaming services with renewed resonance.

Considering this, this paper will utilise a methodology of performance criticism to answer several pertinent research questions, both specific to Hamlet, as well as to the general practice of performing Shakespeare during the pandemic. These include what new formats for Shakespeare performance emerged from this period, and what older forms were revived; why was Hamlet the Shakespeare play that was streamed and produced during this period, and how; and how do these productions engage with Covid as a topic or gain significance during this period, including themes of isolation, moral corruption, illness and death, and fractured communities? Overall, this paper will examine different examples of Hamlet to explore a Covid-19-related tension between psychological lockdown and theatrical revivification.

Overall, this paper will examine different examples of Hamlet to explore a Covid-19-related tension between psychological lockdown and theatrical revivification.

Megan Lynn Selinger, University of Waterloo

“Sidebar Shakespeare: Commenting and Community in the Stratford Festival’s ‘Live’ streamed Viewings”

While the pandemic has shifted some of the best-laid plans for seasons across the globe, it also created a variety of different online and socially distanced experiences. Stratford Festival in Stratford, Ontario, is one such theatre which had to modify its last few seasons dramatically.

This paper will discuss the “live” experience that Stratford created on YouTube in late 2020 and early 2021 by streaming their previous seasons’ productions at a set time. The experience was interactive and engaging, despite the fact that the streamed plays were often more than a year old and were “reruns” for many of the audience members who also saw the material live in 2018 or 2019. I will discuss how the live chat feature created unique hybrid experiences, part play viewings, part theoretical discussions on the works themselves and even part actor Q&As.

This discussion will be contrasted against the alternate way Stratford streamed their 2021 season. The new Stratfest@Home streaming service hosted a number of “virtual plays”, presenting pre-recorded viewings of the smaller, outdoor 2021 season. Akin to Netflix or Disney+, this platform does not include a chat feature and, while the viewings did have an official “start time”, viewers had a 24-hour zone in which to stream the video.

Ultimately this paper will examine the liveness which was created in the rerun productions against the lack thereof in the 2021 season’s online space.

Kathleen Kalpin Smith, University of South Carolina

“Stewart and Shakespeare: Engaging with the Sonnets During the Pandemic”

“It can feel like there is very little to celebrate: We can’t throw birthday parties or wedding receptions or even go out to see a movie on a Friday night. Our kids haven’t been within six feet of their friends in five months, sports are weird, and we’ve got a long, dark winter looming ahead of us. But! Patrick Stewart is still reading sonnets on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).” (Meghan Maravcik Walbert).

The first months of the Covid-19 pandemic were a particularly scary time, absolutely full of uncertainty: what is this virus, how does it transmit, how do we survive it, where is all of the toilet paper? As communities began lockdowns, those of us lucky enough to be in lockdown (that is, not essential workers) experienced social isolation with weariness. In this uneasy time, people found comfort where they could, and many of these strategies included ways to connect remotely when we were forced to be apart. People also turned to cultural and social history to understand what it means to live through a pandemic as well as for a way to feel connected to the past and to each other in the present. This paper considers one example of a subset of these connective experiences, Shakespeare on social media.

Indeed, Shakespeare was a touchstone for people in the early parts of the pandemic (and he has proved to be a reference point throughout). Theaters, suddenly closed, made performances available to stream. Several authors pointed out that Shakespeare experienced a plague and knew what it meant to quarantine. More than one person mused that Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* during the plague, inspiring humorous responses from overwhelmed readers including my favorite, “I guess crying into my burrito is

my *King Lear*.” And Patrick Stewart began to share a reading, once a day, of Shakespeare’s sonnets. I am interested in the popularity of these readings and the use to which Stewart’s project put Shakespeare during the Covid-19 pandemic. Critically reading both Stewart’s performance and the comment boards on social media of those performances, this paper will ask, what about this experience did people value? What does it mean that these are the texts chosen for this project? What does this use of Shakespeare tell us about our relationship to Shakespeare and about our pandemic response?