

2023 Abstracts

Seminar: Shakespeare on Broadway

Tina Simpson, Independent Scholar

Sam Gold's *Macbeth*: A case study on "diverse casting" and the pipeline from regional Shakespeare theatres to Broadway

Broadway productions are often used to categorize and trace trends in theater as a whole; the demographics of Tony awards, Broadway playwrights, and Broadway casts help historicize movements in theater, in part because of the centralized and well-documented history of Broadway productions. The 2022 production of *Macbeth* at the Longacre Theatre cast actors of various genders, races, and abilities in a variety of roles which do not explicitly refer to any of the mentioned qualities. In this paper I would like to consider the role of Lennox, played by wheelchair user Michael Patrick Thornton, within the context of the history of wheelchairs and disability in Shakespeare plays and on Broadway in the last 30 years. I will consider the ways that non-Broadway institutions make decisions quietly that later get amplified and diluted by Broadway productions. I will consider the kinds of roles given to wheelchair actors and suggest that the more high-profile the production, the less central the character and the less risky the casting choice. Broadway, as an institution for Shakespeare, offers a watered-down version of casting choices being made regionally.

Suzanne Delle

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"Voodoo *Macbeth*" Puts a Spell on Broadway

In April 1936 Orson Welles' version of *Macbeth* opened at the Lafayette Theatre. The Lafayette, which was demolished in 2013, was located at 132nd Street and 7th Avenue – officially in Harlem -- but for this production, the white audiences made their way from mid-town up town to the Lafayette. Welles set his production in 19th century Haiti in order to make direct allusions to the Haitian Revolution. This production featured a cast of 150 Black actors, live drummers (medicine people), magic and a uniquely cohesive vision. While not technically on Broadway, the Federal Theatre Project and "Voodoo Macbeth" changed theatre in America and on Broadway.

This paper will look at the start of the Regional Theatre movement under the Federal Theatre Project with their understanding that they needed to make it in New York City if they were going to make it anywhere. While the stories and apocryphal tales are many from this production, and I will share some of them, "Voodoo Macbeth" also was the success that the American Theatre needed to re-energize audiences and funders alike. At this time in U.S. theatrical history, many producers are looking for their own surprise hit to bring audiences back to the theatre and often stories of color are used negatively and positively in search of this goal.

Lisa S. Starks

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Between Two Worlds: *The Dybbuk*, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and Reparative Tragedy

This paper examines how S. Ansky's 1918 play *The Dybbuk*, or *Between Two Worlds* and its subsequent adaptations on stage and screen appropriate *Romeo and Juliet*, transforming Shakespeare's tragedy, through Kabbalah and Jewish folklore, into one that "repairs" the story of star-crossed lovers and the material world that they seek to escape. *The Dybbuk* is a "reparative tragedy," one that intersects multiple levels of restoration, healing, or repair. Generically, the play and its later stage and screen adaptations recuperate and refigure Shakespeare's tragedy; materially, it calls for the repair of past (and impending) trauma, suffering, and severed human relationships. These levels, as well as others, culminate in the play's overriding spiritual one: the play follows the "reparative" narrative of Kabbalah itself, with its goal of *tikkun olam*—to repair the world.

Gemma Kate Allred

'Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story': Shakespearean Allusions in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*

Comparisons between *Hamilton* writer Lin-Manuel Miranda and William Shakespeare are common. Oskar Eustis, artistic director of The Public Theatre in New York, *Hamilton's* first home, claimed of Miranda that: 'Lin does exactly what Shakespeare does, he takes the language of the people and heightens it by making it verse. It both ennoble the language and the people saying the language'. James Shapiro drew parallels between Miranda who looks for 'how we became who we are, and what are the stories we now tell about ourselves, about race, about our political institutions, about how they came to be', and Shakespeare's examination of his contemporary political issues through the history plays.

This paper develops these comparisons, considering the Shakespearean allusions and influences in *Hamilton*. It examines both the explicit parallels drawn between the ambitious and 'scrappy' protagonist, Alexander Hamilton, and Macbeth; and Miranda's use of linguistic codes to isolate Aaron Burr, the musical's primary antagonist, placing him in the Hamlet-like role of a character ultimately destroyed by his own inaction.

ShaxDrag: Campified Performance of Shakespeare-the-author on Broadway

Trevor Boffone and Danielle Rosvally

In the 2015 musical *Something Rotten!*, Broadway audiences were introduced to a character they already knew—William Shakespeare. But this wasn't your high school English classroom Shakespeare. This Shakespeare was clad in tight leather pants a la David Bowie in *Labyrinth* (jump magic jump, amirite?) and wore bad boy eyeliner that could only mean one thing: this Shakespeare bangs. When Christian Borle took the stage of the St. James Theatre in a massive codpiece (you know why!), and bulging biceps, his Shakespeare offered a revised interpretation of Shakespeare, one entrenched in drag aesthetics. This performance of Shakespeare is also perpetuated in *& Juliet* (2022) where Shakespeare's presence is surrounded by the glitz of

nineties and aughts pop music. We propose that this layering-on of eyeliner to draft the rockstar persona of Shakespeare is a form of drag performance: “ShaxDrag,” as we call it. In this paper, we will explore how ShaxDrag manifests in *Something Rotten!* and *Juliet* to problematize the idea of genius, trouble canonicity, and interrogate history’s relationship with Shakespeare and his oeuvre.

Kevin A. Quarmby

Music, *Macbeth*, and the Curse of Broadway

Broadway’s return to post-pandemic near-normalcy reached its climax in April 2022 with a much-anticipated production of *Macbeth*, starring the shared Millennials’ and Gen Z’s “James Bond,” Daniel Craig. Delayed because of inevitable cast COVID cases, director Sam Gold’s production promised its radical “convention-defying” rethink of the perennial Scottish-play tragedy, one of nearly fifty such Broadway revivals since 1768. When eventually it opened in the proscenium arched Longacre Theatre, Gold’s “Mackers” was greeted not with licensed to kill praise, but with dismal “dinner theatre” dismissal.

No less a Macbethian victim of what some perceived as the “directing detritus” imposed on the production was Minnesotan musician and composer Gaelynn Lea. Personally chosen by Gold to provide the soundtrack to his directorial vision, Lea’s “warm and spiritual” music – combined with her self-professed “darker, more Gaelic” folkloric style – would guarantee, as Gold’s pre-publicity announced, a *Macbeth* soundscape that played “against stereotype,” while bringing a “different color” to his dramatic vision. Based on private interviews with the Duluth-based Lea by its author, this paper explores the musician’s creative and decision-making process, while also addressing Broadway’s role in distancing its triple-digit dollar-paying audience from twenty-first-century Shakespeare experimentation and innovation.

Siobhán McKenna’s ‘Experimental Version’ of *Hamlet*

Emer McHugh, University of Galway/Queen’s University Belfast

My paper looks at the American National Theatre and Academy’s (ANTA) 1957 ‘experimental version’—as per the programme—of *Hamlet* starring the Irish actress Siobhán McKenna at the Theatre de Lys (nowadays the Lucille Lortel Theatre). McKenna, who was already established as a major star in Irish theatre and on Broadway at the time, is generally known as a great interpreter of Irish theatre: her leading roles in G. B. Shaw’s *Saint Joan* and Tom Murphy’s *Bailegangaire* are perhaps her crowning achievements in this regard. My paper calls for an assessment of her work beyond this specific Irish theatrical canon, and to also reassess her as a Shakespearean actor. Using materials from her personal archive, particularly her annotated script of *Hamlet* and her letter collection, I show how McKenna is part of a lineage of Irish Shakespearean acting and acting practices.

Natalie Loper

***Six* and Shakespeare’s Queens**

Shakespeare's plays are full of wronged queens. In *Richard III*, the long-suffering Queen Margaret curses half the royal court, including the current queen, Elizabeth (1.3). By the end of the play, Margaret's curses have come true as Richard's evil machinations cause the death or downfall of his royal predecessors, their supporters, and even some of those loyal to him. The queens and former queens, in the wake of tragedy, turn to each other for mutual support. "Teach me how to curse mine enemies," Queen Elizabeth asks her former rival (4.4.116). In *Henry VIII*, or *All is True*, characters recall the tragic events of *Richard III* when discussing the downfall of the Duke of Buckingham, after which they quickly turn to the rumors that Cardinal Wolsey has turned King Henry against his wife of over twenty years, Katherine of Aragon (2.1). The woman who will become his next queen, Anne Boleyn, declares her sympathy for and loyalty to the fallen queen before being swept up into Henry's favor (2.3). In *The Winter's Tale*, Queen Hermione appears to die after her husband wrongly accuses her of having an affair with his best friend. Her loyal friend Paulina hides and cares for the queen for sixteen years while ensuring that King Leontes never forgets how he wronged his wife and children. Throughout his plays, Shakespeare's women are often pitted against one another. Moments of solidarity are poignant reminders of how strong women are, especially when they work together. In the musical *SIX*, written by Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss in 2017, the six wives of Henry VIII compete against each other for the role of lead singer in a new girl band. The woman who has the most tragic story and who can gain the audience's sympathy and votes wins the contest. The musical's premise rests on the fact that history mainly remembers these queens based on their relationship with the king and their tragic endings: "divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, survived." As each woman sings about her tragic tale, the others make the case for their own prominence and try to rule out the queens who didn't suffer as much as them. By the end, Catherine Parr (survived) points out the folly of tearing each other down because they have all suffered enough. Instead, they should be defined for their own accomplishments, separate from Henry VIII. They reimagine happier endings for themselves, united as equals in the band. My essay argues that just as Shakespeare retold history for dramatic effect, the musical *SIX* serves as a feminist retelling of historical queens in the #metoo era.

Hannah Korell

"God, I Hate Shakespeare": The Paradoxes of Broadway's *Something Rotten!* (2015)

Broadway's *Something Rotten!* (2015) is a nest of paradoxes. The introduction to our protagonist, Nick Bottom, is through his booming baritone declaring, "God, I hate Shakespeare!" – met with uproarious laughter when I saw the show in 2015 – a seeming invitation to the audience into a cathartic communitas with the character, a recognition that it is okay to "hate" Shakespeare. Yet, the show is surely a love letter to Shakespeare and Shakespeare fans and scholars – even Nick Bottom's name requires basic knowledge of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to fully understand. Indeed, to truly follow the show's plot, characters, and jokes, one needs an encyclopedic knowledge of Shakespeare's works – the musical either subtly alludes to or directly references nearly every play over its two-hour runtime. Despite this potential gatekeeping, the musical clearly has broad commercial appeal: unlike other more niche shows, *Something Rotten!* has also enjoyed a Broadway afterlife, with a successful two-year National Tour (2017-2019) and international performances in Karlstad Sweden (2018-2019) and Seoul (2020).

This paradox forms the central question for this essay: how does *Something Rotten!* make Shakespeare and the English Renaissance seem accessible and fun to modern audiences while simultaneously locking much of its plot and humor behind an impenetrable wall of nuanced Shakespearean trivia and lore? This essay will provide a close-reading of *Something Rotten!* to discern how its formal craft and cultural politics render it able to appeal to so many different audiences. Ultimately, the unbelievable meta-nature of *Something Rotten!* – which contains copious references not only to the works of Shakespeare but to other musicals – provides a fascinating example of the ways in which Shakespeare on Broadway yokes together the neoliberal culture of Broadway with the neoliberal cult of Shakespeare.

Speaking Back to Broadway: Keith Hamilton Cobb's *Untitled Othello*" Abstract

By Emily Bryan, Sacred Heart University

Keith Hamilton Cobb's *American Moor* indicts the system for training actors in America, the white privilege of Shakespeare production, and the re-affirming of racist stereotypes that American theater audiences seem to hunger for. *American Moor* reached off-Broadway with a performance at the Cherry Lane Theatre and the Red Bull Theatre and was produced at the Sam Wanamaker Theatre in London. However, it didn't make it to Broadway, or to large regional theaters, like the Public, or the Guthrie, or the Washington Shakespeare Theatre. Cobb would argue that the play was too much of an indictment of the capitalist theatrical system that is racist, misogynist, and de-humanizing because of the tyranny of profit and product over art and the artistic process. His project, The Untitled Othello Project, eschews the typical structures of American theatre production. He rejects the 5-week rehearsal process, the poverty-level wages, the design-driven production values, the star vehicle performances, and the fake adherence to trends. Instead, he is seeking an alternative. This essay is about the ways in which Cobb is structuring and pursuing a version of *Othello* that feels authentic to him. The journey, which started in 2021, has been fraught, productive, and challenging. In rejecting the profit-driven creation of Broadway and regional theatre, Cobb is calling for creative justice, yet by embracing the academic field as a home or nursery for this work, is he replacing one neo-liberal institution with another, and can he fashion a new American way of working in the theatre within the confines of a capitalist system? One of the project goals for Untitled Othello is: "To approach our work as artists with the intention of giving scope and definition to the term, Creative Altruism, as a practice of social, economic, and restorative justice. Creators, meaning *all* who contribute to a creation, require care, agency, and environments conducive to collaboration. Creative Altruism aims at re-imagining arts production free of the perpetual compromises imposed upon it by the American business model." The very goals of the project put Cobb on a collision course with Broadway and the current model of production in America by highlighting the inadequacy of the economic system of the theatre to attend to the lived experiences and actual bodies of the human beings (the artists) making the work. The Untitled Othello project's website hosts two short videos which it would be helpful for seminar participants to look at (www.untitledothello.com) – both are on the landing page ("I wanna talk a little bit about. . ." and "The term 'Moor' is . . . problematic." As well, this is a short [document](#) about how the residency at Sacred Heart University was developed.