

SAA 2025 – Gemma Allred

‘The time is out of joint’: Gambling, Ghosts and Gielgud

1963, the set of *Becket*. A coin toss. Peter O’Toole and Richard Burton had decided to both play Hamlet. The flipped coin determined the city and director.

1963, O’Toole stars in Laurence Olivier’s *Hamlet* in London, in the inaugural production of Britain’s National Theatre.

1964, Burton stars in John Gielgud’s *Hamlet* on Broadway.

2023, 60 years after the infamous coin toss, Jack Thorne’s *The Motive and the Cue* opens at the National Theatre. A play that transports the audience back to the rehearsal room of the Burton/Gielgud *Hamlet*.

2024, Mark Gatiss wins an Olivier Award for his portrayal of Gielgud.

But is this timeline complete? Is that where the story starts and ends?

This paper takes as its focus both original O’Toole and Burton *Hamlets* and *The Motive and the Cue* and asks why Hamlet, why Shakespeare and why now?

2025 Meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America, Boston, MA

Abstract for Seminar on Abridging Shakespeare for the British and American Stage

“Auditory Proof: *Othello* Abridged” – Stephen M. Buhler, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

This is less an abstract than a backstory with a progress report.

I plan to submit an aggressively abridged version of *Othello* for comment and advice from the group: the hope is to make possible a performance with a runtime of 80 minutes. My experience with abridgment goes back decades. As Education Director for Flatwater Shakespeare Company (FSC), based in Lincoln, Nebraska, I regularly crafted Youth Versions of our mainstage plays. Our young actors would perform the shortened scripts on the same sets as the mainstage production, gaining experience and confidence with Shakespearean language and stagecraft. (I am perhaps inordinately proud of a switched-genders *The Comedy of Errors*.) In recent years, now as Resident Scholar for the company, I have devised 75-minute texts for early summer, providing “family-friendly” entertainment in the sense of quickly paced, no-intermission, short-enough-for-diminished-attention-spans-of-all-ages. The “Short Shakespeare” series also tours area parks with minimal sets and no lights; we have to be done well before sunset, so audience, cast, and crew can be present and also clear out safely. The latest in the series was a *Love’s Labor’s Lost* from which poor Holofernes and Sir Nathaniel were banished in the interest of time. Still, the results were successful and (we could see and were told) entertaining.

Due to the interest in attracting as broad an audience as possible, FSC chooses comedies for its “Short Shakespeare” performances. Although I have done several (dozens, perhaps) performance cuts for tragedies and romances, I have not yet abridged a tragedy, until now.

That’s because a new ensemble has developed in Omaha, Nebraska in response to the dissolution (or implosion) of the Nebraska Shakespeare Festival, a company that staged the city’s annual Shakespeare on the Green performances. Old School Shakespeare Omaha (OSSO) aims for smaller, more intimate, and more flexible productions than its predecessor. Scripts generally lead to 90 minute (or less) runtimes and can rely significantly on narration in exposition, both at the outset of plays and in bridging gaps in the plot due to abridgments. OSSO shows can occur year-round because they take place indoors – including, so far in the company’s history, in bars, distilleries, coffeehouses, and museum spaces. This is the group for whom I am crafting an abridged *Othello*, at the company’s invitation. At this point, I have achieved a respectable edit, one that would work with a cast of 8 or 10 – but as yet it’s a script that would work for a standard production, perhaps two hours’ traffic, not an abridged one. I have a lot more cutting – and narrating – to do. That next step in the process will lead to what I will share with the members of this seminar.

SAA 2025

Seminar 1: Abridging Shakespeare for the British and American Stage

Dr Ronan Hatfull, University of Warwick and NYU London

‘This is too long’: The *other* RSC and their legacy of abridgement

This paper begins with an account of Reed Martin and Austin Tichenor’s return to San Francisco in January 2025, where they were awarded the Shakespeare Theatre Association’s Sandra and Sidney Berger Award ‘in recognition of their outstanding talent and dedication to the works of William Shakespeare’ as the co-Managing Partners of the Reduced Shakespeare Company (RSC). It then identifies individuals and companies who have been influenced by the RSC and presents a blueprint for theatrical abridgement: the Ten Commandments of Reduction. Theatre-makers who bear the hallmarks of the company’s legacy are then explored in relation to the RSC’s working practices, including The HandleBards, Magnificent Bastard Productions and The Pantaloons. *The Complete Deaths* by the European physical comedy theatre company Spymonkey is given particular attention given its close connections to the RSC’s first play *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)*. Lastly, the paper theorises that this ‘other RSC’ are an example of metamodernism and unpacks how their work, and that which influences, swings between irony and sincerity.

"no further in this business": Audience expectations and pruned performance in Improv and Classical Theatre

Improvisation and the performance of scripted plays can feel a world apart. Performers in a scripted show might be said to take one document towards one of an infinity of interpretations, in the journey from text to audience; improvisers take an infinity of potential shows, find story threads, and 'abridge' them into one show, in the journey from audience to text.

This paper shows that the improvised/written dichotomy is simplistic and many of the same processes of audience feedback (or, crucially, feedback with an imagined audience) are underway in both forms of theatre – indeed, as a tool of scholarship, the quick-feedback abridgements of improvisation reveal latent processes in the rehearsal room that could contribute greatly to our theories of play making.

Moreover, attempts to make Shakespearean texts "relevant", as work by Bridget Escolme has shown, foreground the actors-as-themselves more clearly in productions, a process that forms a central part of the appeal of improvisation, as audience simultaneously enjoy a story, and the sufferings of the storytellers, in real time. So over decades, the gap is shrinking further.

We explore this concept in two parts: moments from several improvised plays in the Shakespearean style are excerpted and commented upon by the performers themselves as they progress, so as to understand the paths not taken as well as those that were.

An accompanying essay seeks to situate these insights in reception theory and the study of audiences, to show how the same processes of shaping a performance in response to imagined audience take place in rehearsal room choices compared to improv on stage.

SAA 2025: Abridging Shakespeare for the British and American Stage

The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)

Austin Tichenor

Playwright/Actor/co-artistic director, *Reduced Shakespeare Company*

In 2019, my Reduced Shakespeare Company partner and I followed up our abridgment of Shakespeare's entire canon in *William Shakespeare's Long Lost First Play (abridged)* with a very *unreduced* deep dive into *Hamlet*, his arguably greatest but certainly most influential play. *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)* is notable amongst our scripts for several reasons: It's the first time we've expanded upon an existing text; and it's the first of our RSC scripts that foregoes the vaudeville framing device of the three cast members introducing and frequently interrupting the proceedings with banter and commentary.

Viewing *Hamlet* through a skeptical comic lens allowed us to interrogate the text from both academic and theatrical perspectives, imagining what might it be like if Tom Stoppard wrote *Muppet Babies*, while answering questions Shakespeare posed but never answered, like:

- Where did Hamlet get his incredibly detailed knowledge of theatre?
- Why is Ophelia's mother never even *mentioned*?
- Is Polonius his first name or his last name?
- Why did Ophelia never take swim lessons?

In a happy coincidence, this year's SAA conference in Boston coincides with the second week of the play's three-week run just up the road in Lowell at Merrimack Repertory Theatre. And after workshoping *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)* in 2019 and then not being able to give it its expected rollout in 2020, our first MRT performance on March 12, 2025 marks the fifth anniversary *to the day* of Broadway and the rest of the theatre world shutting down due to COVID-19. We're thrilled to be back.

Suggested reading (*attached*)

Martin, Reed and Austin Tichenor, *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)*, Broadway Play Publishing, 2023.

SAA Abstract

“ A Pickle-Herring with Your *Hamlet*? Clowning for Exposition and Audience Engagement”

The main element that distinguishes my current adaptation of *Hamlet* is its playful use of embedded narration and explanatory commentary. While there is historical precedence for the “Pickle-Herring” figure in the practice of English acting troupes employing a local clown to interpret Shakespeare for otherwise bewildered Continental audiences, my goals in using this figure are slightly different. Arguably, today there is an even greater gap in understanding between contemporary audiences and Shakespeare’s language. This is particularly true for the Southern college students that I serve, many whom are victims of the poor literacy rates of Southern state school systems that also increasingly police for any references to racial equity or queer identities. My adaptation highlights elements of gender identity within the play, including working with students to rethink pronoun usage and to amplify historical gender fluidity in Shakespearean theatre. Pulled from my years of directing Shakespeare, studying clowning and improvisation as a performer, and my scholarly research of *Hamlet* and its early performance conditions, I will be putting myself and non-Shakespearean language into Shakespeare for the first time. I will be taking this liberty less because of my acting abilities than the opportunities it affords the students to strategically undermine my patriarchal authority, poking holes in my own performance as a privileged Western white male.