

Bill Worthen

**“you can repeat every word I say.”**

*Fires in the Mirror*

I’m interested in Carmel Cato’s line, the final line of *Fires in the Mirror*.

Just about every word of this sentence engages with our reading for this week, and with the wider question of the performative, both in terms of utterance and embodiment. The circumstances of the felicitous performative (all those alpha, beta, gamma conditions) define the performative utterance as repeatable and citational, dependent as Butler suggests on a context of *support*. The *hollow, etiolated* nature of theatrical utterance for Austin is, I suppose as Butler and Derrida both agree, invoked here, in that Smith’s utterance is part of a systematically theatrical repetition, “spoken in soliloquy,” so to speak; perhaps more to the point Smith herself is doubled here, both the “you” Cato is addressing, and the performer asserting that gesture, posture, vocal tone, rhythm and enunciation (what about those other qualities of embodiment: the physical qualities of Smith herself?) are not, um, “acting” in the conventional sense but something else, asserting a more authentic opening to the “I” who speaks. Is this an occasion in which Smith uses her access to the infrastructure of performance to authorize Cato’s *saying*, to lend it force, even if that force is theatrical? Smith, of course, doesn’t repeat *every* word; she does edit (the PBS video shows that; it’s my understanding that at least in early performances she experiments with a different ordering of “characters”). And this *word* is moved from one scene of utterance, an interview, to another, both a dramatic script (Smith sees herself as a “playwright” not a “performance artist,” and *Fires* was controversially set aside from the Pulitzer Prize in drama because she didn’t *write* it), and a performance—both of which have, now, a kind of conventional shape and form. This final line also lends a kind of authorization back to Smith I think: both in *Fires* and in her next work, *Twilight*, Smith was (and feared to be) criticized for appropriating others to her work in ways that can—given the quotational structure of her performance—only seem ironic, critical, without the clarity of Brecht’s *Verfremdung*, which Butler frames in “Gesture” better on 186 than on 182, where it’s identified as it often is with a narrowly “didactic” purpose. Does Smith doubled impersonation of Cato enable a “break out of the continuity of history” by presenting the terms of its repletion as at once graspable and alterable?

I’m interested in the final line of *Fires in the Mirror* for a number of reasons that cross over our readings for today. First, of course, it’s one of the lines in the piece that invokes Smith—she is, in a sense, both Cato and Smith, addressing herself through her deft mimicry of his voice and gestures. This little moment aligns for me with Butler’s effort to engage the performative force of gesture and embodiment, something they are working to do without reducing gesture—as the theatre semiotics of the 1970s and 80s did (and does)—to something more closely aligned with a “language.” How to account for the force of gesture in constituting the subject, and, here, in constituting both subjects (Cato and Smith) or all subjects (Cato and Smith and a theatrical audience; Cato and Smith and a tv audience; Cato and Smith and a streaming audience decades later) through the interlocking systems that render both word and embodiment, um, something like locutionarily performative?

Kurt Daw  
San Francisco State University

### **The idea of a Performance Edition**

At the center of the tensions between the “sometimes antagonistic disciplines” of Shakespearean Studies and Performance Studies is the conceptual difficulty ensuing from early modern texts that are simultaneously generative and preservative (2). Perhaps the earliest form of Shakespeare Performance Studies, i.e., scholarship that attempts to serve both academic readers and theatrical practitioners, is the “performance edition.” This essay examines the history of performance editions, from that of Edward Capell to the present, especially the manner in which they illuminate how literary scholars and performers imagine each other’s goals and needs. As the field is not yet close to achieving consensus about what a performance edition should be, or how it should serve its constituents, the paper proposes some possible directions for future development.

Worthen, W. B. *Shakespeare Performance Studies*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Amanda Di Ponio  
Huron University College  
Seminar Abstract SAA 2025: Shakespeare Performance Now

Identity and Representation in Shakespeare Performance Now:  
A Study of Casual Racism in of *Much Ado About Nothing*

In the summer of 2022, I saw two productions of *Much Ado About Nothing* in London, England at The Globe (dir. Lucy Bailey) and The National Theatre (dir. Simon Godwin), and a third the following year, in Stratford, Ontario at The Festival Theatre (dir. Chris Abraham). A popular comedy, the presence of three productions in two seasons was not particularly surprising,<sup>1</sup> but what I witnessed on the stages of these popular theatre venues caused me to question why contemporary productions of Shakespeare performance, especially the comedies, continue to engage in a tradition of casual racism, stereotyping, and caricature, most recently cautioned in Patricia Akhimie's chapter "Racist Humor and Shakespearean Comedy" in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race* (2021), edited by Ayanna Thompson, and why some pervasive racist representations continue to be permitted on stage, but others are not. While all three productions were set in Italy (i.e. two were set in Messina, Sicily, one at a resort and the other at an estate, and one in Veneto, Northern Italy), two were historically placed in post-Mussolini's Italy, and all engaged in both gender-neutral and colour-blind/conscious casting. The London productions, however, chose to reinforce the play's participation in reducing characters "to their nationality, region of origin" and "stereotypical habits (mostly bad), hobbies, modes of dress, [and] favorite foods of that nation" (Akhimie 54). Shakespearean comedies indeed have the potential to allow us to feel the palpable pain of racialized characters; however, in The National Theatre production, especially, little else was observed other than bad Italian stereotypes played for laughs, leaving me, to borrow Akhimie's phrase, to "explore the wound", and investigate "the constructedness of ... caricatures or stereotypes" (58).

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<sup>1</sup> I recognize my privilege in having been able to experience all three live in performance.

## INTERMEDIAL *QUEEN LEAR* ON THE MADRID STAGE: REMEDIATING GENDER AND POWER

Susan L. Fischer, Bucknell University

This “intermedial” production of *Queen Lear* (2022)—deploying “recorded and projected performance alongside ‘live’ acting,” and having “technologies of digital projection (new) and hand-built scenery (old) work side-by-side” (Worthen, *Shakespeare, Technicity, Theatre*, 2020)—followed a text (re)written by Juan Carlos Rubio in collaboration with director Natalia Menéndez: *Queen Lear: Fragmentos de una lectura microscópica y libre de “El Rey Lear” de William Shakespeare*.

In the wake of the 2017 resurgence of the #MeToo movement, this *Queen Lear* could not but intersect with the enunciation of gender as performative rather than innate, giving agency to the female voice and character. Besides remaking patriarch/paternity into matriarch/maternity, the production double-cast the roles of Kent and the Fool in one female actor and canceled male characters except for Edmond and France. *Queen Lear* proffered a different ending from the “original,” one thought to open a door to hope.

This study, which focuses not so much on *technicity* of theatre as on habitual uses of *technology in* the theatre, is informed by two basic questions: How did performative remediation of gender and patriarchal power manifest itself? How did theatricalized technologies natural to the stage (acting, directing, and design), together with recording and projecting technologies, underline issues of gender and power?

## **Scholars Versus Superfans: Responding to the Challenges of Immersive Theatre Research**

**D.J. Hopkins**

Abstract

In this white paper, I reflect on fourteen years of fieldwork at *Sleep No More*, Punchdrunk's sprawling immersive theatre adaptation of *Macbeth* — and the subject of [my recent mini-monograph](#). Drawing on both scholarly research and the perspectives of devoted “superfans,” I argue that immersive theatre presents unique historiographic challenges that conventional research methodologies struggle to address. The scale, simultaneity, and participatory nature of productions like *Sleep No More* require new approaches that can capture both a narrative sense of “what happened” and the experience of embodied spectatorship. This paper critiques traditional critical practices (including my own published work) and proposes an innovative “immersive theatre observatory” that leverages digital humanities methodologies to analyze the complex intersections of space, performance, and spectatorship in a network visualization. Using digital tools to integrate scholarly analysis with the first-hand accounts of audience experience, this approach offers a new model for documenting and theorizing immersive Shakespeare adaptations in performance.

**Performing Shakespeare, Performing Social Justice**  
**Leigh Anne Howard**  
**University of Southern Indiana**

In this paper I address Davis Ruitter's question about how social justice is being forwarded by Shakespeare scholarship and practice by clarifying three types of social justice performance. First, I provide an overview of Shakespeare and social justice, as well as performance's sociopolitical facility. Then, I explore how Shakespearean productions achieve a range of social justice aims by generating awareness, constructing (alterative) social views, and reconstructing understandings people currently hold. In this way, performance does not merely illustrate social injustice—or the need for social justice—but the production, itself, is social justice in action.

Elizabeth Hunter, Washington University in St. Louis

This paper explores the foundational role “Shakespeare performance” plays in the critical concept of “enactive spectatorship”—a new theoretical framework for understanding audience participation in immersive theater. I propose the concept of “enactivity” to describe how audiences inhabit positionalities that are vital to the dramaturgy of an unfolding narrative yet lack the agency to alter the intended course of that narrative. These positionalities are shaped by four production conditions: a historically resonant site, a canonical source, an immersive space, and a production-specific economy that incentivizes some audience behaviors and discourages others. One way to understand these conditions is as a sound board with faders that can be amplified or dampened, with the resulting “mix” encouraging participation that resembles the enactment of an archetype. The mix of enactivity at the new Globe in London, for example, encourages the archetype of “worshipper,” while Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More* encourages that of “sleuth.” This paper focuses on the fader of a canonical source, epitomized here as the plays of William Shakespeare. Amid the twenty-first century’s ever-increasing push for audience participation, understanding how “Shakespeare performance” fosters enactivity sheds new light on the stratagems productions use to shape this participation in real time.

Rethinking Shakespearean Performance through Transness

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As intentioned enacts of dramatic and social texts, performances are bracketed by “social practices of daily life” (Diana Taylor). By virtue of this bracketing, performances are governed by stage and film crafts that produce a transitory space-time and point to the world beyond the fabula. Actors walk into dressing rooms as twenty-first-century artists and emerge as characters in Shakespeare’s early modern English imagination of medieval Denmark. Performances create transitive spaces, and transness is pervasive in Shakespearean performances.

This position paper proposes trans as method for performance studies, namely transness as not only a spectrum of experiences associated with gender identity, but also movements through space-time or residing in transitory social spaces. The kinetic prefix and verb “trans” evokes transgression, transience, and transition. Transness also points to fluctuating experiences and life cycles of performance texts.

There are two features of this capacious notion of transness.

First, at the core of transness is the notion of linguistic performativity. Distinct from performance as an artistic genre, performativity refers to language’s function of affecting social action in explicit or implicit manners. Building on J.L. Austin’s speech act theory and Judith Butler’s *Who’s Afraid of Gender* (2024), I develop a theory of performative transness to investigate gender in performance as evolving interpersonal relationships in transitory space-time. As a spatial and temporal concept, gender reflects what one does in a given space at a given point in time.

Second, transness is understood in relation to body in time, as transness can become overt or tacit over time. Particular presentational aspects in one scene only represent actors’ and characters’ bodies in one moment in time, similar to other processes such as aging or wearing one’s hair long or short. In a different scene, or in a different decade when a production is revived, those bodies may cease to index the practices they do today.

Early modern cross-gender stage practices and our contemporary engagement with the Shakespearean notion of genderplay make Shakespearean performances trans theatre even when undertaken by cisgender actors. Trans as method can denaturalize originary concepts of purity and decolonize the cisgender, patriarchal symbolic order that consigns individuals and texts to a destined final form.

**Keywords:** transness; transgender theory; speech act; performativity; trans aesthetics; performance

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SAA 2025 Boston—“Shakespeare Performance Studies Now” Seminar

### Shakespeare Performance as Ritual

Both scholars and the general public alike tend to assume that the purpose of the early modern stage was to tell stories. This concept of theatre is now so widespread that it is the implicit standard against which even experimental genres—postdramatic theatre, performance art, devised theatre, etc.—are defined. In contrast to such views, I present some excerpts from a first draft of my book introduction. The book as a whole traces the birth of the art form that we call “theatre,” a peculiar kind of mimetic playing that is now our default but which, I argue, arose only in Shakespeare’s era. Drawing on a range of archival sources, it reveals how May Games, Robin Hood gatherings, morris dances, and other holiday customs crucially shaped the performance dynamics of the London playhouses. Rather than analyzing how festive practices were depicted “in” drama, I ask: what is the ritual function of theatrical mimesis? This paper elaborates on some implications of this approach for both early modern theatre studies and theatre historiography as a whole.

## Abstract

SAA 2025 Shakespeare Performance Now

Alexandra Lukawski (Western University)

### Radical Retellings for Radical Change: A Case Study of Cliff Cardinal's *As You Like It*

In October 2021 I bought tickets for *As You Like It*, produced by Crow's Theatre in Toronto. This production was directed by Cliff Cardinal, a Canadian Indigenous playwright and actor. Rumours swirled once the production hit the stage that it was unlike any other Shakespeare adaptation. Indeed, Cardinal's subheading for the play reads: "A Radical Retelling". The show ended up being a ruse, with the real show being *The Land Acknowledgment*, which involved Cliff coming onto the stage and setting up a land acknowledgment that becomes an hour and a half monologue. The show was ripe with controversy, with some audiences storming out while others hailed it as genius. In conversation with Shakespeare Race scholarship and online reviews about Cardinal's show, I argue that Cardinal creates a new use for Shakespeare: One where the white enterprise of the Bard is used non-conventionally to harness silenced voices. This paper invites readers to think through this case study as an example of how Shakespeare performance can harness the traditionally problematic aspects of Shakespeare to give voice to those traditionally marginalized.

## Abstract for "Theory Vs. Performance," David McCandless

My essay is drawn from a larger project examining the history of performance theory. The advent of poststructuralism gave performance critics unprecedented license to ignore performance if they wished, to appraise not the practice of practitioners but their words, not what they did on stage but on what they said in books. Given the great gulf between theater and academia--their status as foreign countries, speaking different language--the attempt to deconstruct practitioners' language was inherently perilous and not always productive. Given the space limitations of a seminar essay, I've focused on what I regard as the most extreme case of theory prosecuting performance in ways exemplifying the pitfalls of the practice: Sarah Werner's scourging of the three leading voice teachers in the English-speaking world: Cicely Berry, Patsy Rodenburg, and Kristin Linklater. I argue that Werner's pronounced estrangement from theater practice leads to some unhelpful misrecognitions and dubious hermeneutics, which become especially evident when she criticizes a performance she gives no evidence of having seen on the basis of a single metaphor the actor in question employs to describe one aspect of one scene. I end with a plea to mind the gap between theory and performance.

**Africa as Tourist Place at the RSC**  
**By Rob Ormsby**

In this paper, I will discuss a twenty-first-century *Julius Caesar* production set in Africa to consider how assessing such performance in relation to the creation of tourist places can help us think about Shakespeare performance studies. I will argue that the RSC's 2012 *Julius Caesar*, directed by Gregory Doran, depicted a themed or touristic version of Africa that solidified the company's identity as a purveyor of tourist performance. To do so, I will address a number of questions. How did the production signal to audiences they were watching a version of Africa (as opposed to a specific country or region within the continent) and in what ways was it themed? What did the representation of a non-European setting by this large mainstream company say about Shakespearean performance in the early twenty-first century and how did the setting relate to Stratford's identity as a tourist place? What ideas about Shakespeare were brought to bear on design, casting, and publicity and what effects did such ideas have on the productions' reception? Finally, how does this *Caesar* fit into the ways the RSC has historically used Shakespeare's writing to create performance?

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**David Schalkwyk**

**Blindness to history: Shakespeare's directorless theatre and present scholarship and practice**

One of the most puzzling and remarkable aspects of recent theatre history of the early modern English theatre has been that almost total disregard of what might be considered the *central* feature of Shakespeare's theatre: the absence of a director, or any director-like figure. Despite speculations that a director's role may have been played by the bookkeeper or even Shakespeare himself, there is absolutely no hard evidence that there was any figure occupying the role of a modern director on the Shakespearean stage. The rise of original practice in the late twentieth century, especially in the early years of the Globe Theatre, London, ignored directorless theatre almost completely, focussing instead on material features like costume, music, and to some extent, all-male casting. Directorless plays were a side-show, with little sustained life. Exceptions are the American Shakespeare Theatre's Renaissance season, which offered a compromised form of Shakespeare without a director, and a brief, equally compromised 'directorless' ensemble under Michelle Terry at the Globe from 2018 to 2020. Drawing on a four-year project that offered directorless productions of Shakespeare in the UK, Italy and Germany between 2017 and 2020, this paper argues that a crucial blindspot remains in present-day theatre history that refuses to acknowledge fully the crucial significance of the fact that the fundamental theatrical practice of early modern English theatre produced the most significant theatre in English history, *without* the modern figure of the director.

Holger Syme  
University of Toronto

## Unremarkable Shakespeare

This paper uses examples from the extensive archive of Shakespeare productions in Berlin over the past 100 years to argue that performances of Shakespeare are both a boon and a problem for modern theatre history. On the one hand, their sheer ubiquity in theatrical repertoires since the nineteenth century, perhaps especially in Europe and North America, allows them to serve as a sort of common denominator or shared ground, making possible comparisons of theatrical practices in relative independence from differences between playwrights and their specific demands. From that perspective, we might be able to compare the work of dramaturgs, directors, designers, and actors at, say, the Staatstheater in the 1920s and the East Berlin Volksbühne in the 1970s, tracing throughlines and charting aesthetic and political ruptures and departures as well as commonalities. The value of “Shakespeare” in such an undertaking is precisely that there is nothing inherently distinctive about Shakespeare performances: everyone does them and everyone is more or less free to do in them whatever they please. These productions reveal more about the theatrical cultures in which they are made than about Shakespeare’s plays.

That is the boon. The problem is that the productions that have attracted the most attention from theatre historians have been ones that have been seen to do something especially interesting or especially problematic to or with *specific* Shakespeare plays: Jessner’s 1926 *Hamlet*, Fehling’s 1937 *Richard III*, Brecht’s version of *Coriolanus*, first staged in 1964, Besson’s 1977 *Hamlet*, most recently perhaps Ostermeier’s 2008 *Hamlet* (still in rep to this day). I will argue that this constitutes two methodological problems from a theatre-historical perspective. For one, it privileges the relationship between text and performance as the primary angle of performance analysis over, say, the relationship between a specific production and other productions of the same play, or other Shakespeare plays, or between a specific production and other productions from the same period, even though these may well be the more relevant contexts (in the case of Besson’s *Hamlet*, for instance, this can be richly documented from the extensive rehearsal records). For another, the singling out of individual productions for their unusual approach to a particular text risks distorting our sense of the actual broader performance culture from which they emanate: their very originality makes them unrepresentative. It may be more difficult to say anything especially interesting about many of the over 400 Shakespeare productions staged in Berlin since 1920, but most of them probably reflect theatre history more accurately than the shows on which scholars have primarily focussed. And many of them have left at least as rich an archival record. To address these problems, I will briefly discuss a set of productions virtually unknown to theatre scholarship: Victor Barnowsky’s *As You Like It*, staged over 120 times between 1925 and 1930; three productions of *Othello* staged at different Berlin theatres during the “Third Reich”; and two examples of “political” theatre in East and West, the East Berlin Deutsche Theater’s 1964 *Hamlet* and the West Berlin Schaubühne’s 1968 *King John*.

## **Tools, Materials, and LEGO: A return to first principles.**

Caitlin West, University of Queensland

This paper revisits a fundamental and unresolved question in Shakespeare performance studies: What is the nature of the relationship between the printed text and performance? What, in fact, *is* the printed text, and (how) does it appear in performance?

I argue that the Shakespearean text both invites and limits creative freedom in dramatic performance. In my recently awarded doctoral thesis, I used an analogy of LEGO bricks to articulate the function of the text and its relationship with performance. This analogy draws on and extends the work of W. B. Worthen, who characterises the text as a tool in the technology of performance (216), and David Schalkwyk, who contends that the text is not a tool, but a constitutive *material* of a performance (53). I distinguish between text and *words*, arguing that the text may indeed be a tool, but that the words or dialogue inscribed in that text are materials. I argue that these words are not raw materials but are oriented towards performance in a way that both prompts a creative response, and also sets limits on what performers can do in a dramatic performance. This distinction between text and words, and tools and materials, adds nuance to the discussion of the relationship between texts and performance, complicating the assertion that “texts do not direct how we use them” (Worthen 210).

Dawn Monique Williams

**“But I do it more natural”: Shakespeare in the Black Community**

**Abstract**

If Artistic Directors acknowledge and balance the tension between honoring Shakespeare’s historical canon and embracing the cultural identities of Black actors, then they can navigate the polarity of tradition and innovation, creating theatre spaces and productions that are both artistically authentic and inclusive while building trust with marginalized actors. In 2019, Free Shakespeare in the Park, under the leadership of Oscar Eustis, chose to produce Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, directed by Kenny Leon. Leon’s vision for the production fully embraced a community cultural wealth model. The practice exemplified by this production of *Much Ado About Nothing* demonstrated the power and necessity of polarity management, inclusive representation, and collective efficacy. Within a community cultural wealth model, this production affirmed the cultural identities of these Black actors and audience members and challenged centuries-old Eurocentric traditions. As educational systems continue to grapple with the legacy of systemic racism, embracing diverse cultural perspectives in the arts enriches performance and fosters a more equitable and inclusive society. The ongoing dialogue and efforts to dismantle racial barriers in Shakespearean pedagogy, casting, and production approaches are crucial steps toward broader acceptance and appreciation of multicultural narratives in classical theatre.