

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation, ed. by
Gemma Kate Allred, Benjamin Broadribb and Erin Sullivan (London:
Bloomsbury/Arden, 2022). 296 pp. ISBN 9781350247826

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When I began my PhD on the relationship between staged Shakespeare and the screen in the latter half of 2019, little did I realise that, less than six months later, this area of performance would be plunged to the forefront of critical discourse. The nascent art form of broadcasting stage performances of Shakespeare (and theatre more widely) is ripe for analysis. Leading this exploration, editors and contributors Gemma Kate Allred, Benjamin Broadribb and Erin Sullivan (also author of the equally timely *Shakespeare and Digital Performance in Practice*), collaborate to bring one of the first comprehensive analyses of Shakespearean performance during the Covid-19 pandemic: *Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation*. Part of the Arden Shakespeare's Shakespeare and Adaptation series, this 2022 publication is at the forefront of examining lockdown theatre. Comprised of a mixture of critical essays, interviews with online theatre practitioners, it also features a comprehensive inventory of notable online performances during multiple global lockdowns.

In their introduction, editors Allred, Broadribb, and Sullivan are emphatic in pre-empting any misconceptions about the nature of the book: 'Let us be clear: this book, *Lockdown Shakespeare*, is not a lament for lost theatre' (p. 3). Indeed, this publication is the reverse: a complete celebration of new modes of theatre being born out of a global pandemic. Divided into three sections, Part One of the book, entitled 'Analyses', provides the reader with six essays from leading scholars and practitioners in the field of Shakespeare and the screen. It opens with an essay by John Wyver, academic and screen director for the Royal Shakespeare Company, whose chapter 'The Screen Language of Lockdown: Connection and Choice in Split-Screen Performance' straight away analyses the changing '[s]creen [l]anguage of [l]ockdown' (p. 23) brought about

by the need to move theatre online. Examining the emergence of split-screen performance, dictated by the move to Zoom and other online platforms, Wyver's discussion speaks to the fracture and dismantling of physical theatre itself when the industry was brought to its knees by worldwide lockdowns. However, as this book aims to address, this necessary relocation of theatre online brought about successful innovation and pushed the boundaries of what could be achieved in the online sphere. Indeed, in his essay 'Lockdown Shakespeare and the Metamodern Sensibility', Benjamin Broadribb, discussing the use of online platforms, declares that Zoom 'emerged as a metamodern technosocial marker of the pandemic' (p. 52). Having established the changing parameters of creating theatre through online media, Gemma Kate Allred, in her chapter, 'Notions of Liveness in Lockdown Performance', explores an issue key to the discussions of the relationship between theatre and the screen (even pre-pandemic): liveness. Drawing on the oft-cited writings of Peggy Phelan and Philip Auslander, Allred develops these theories and how they pertain to a mode of 'live' performance hitherto not witnessed. Providing numerous examples (as this book does well as a whole) of online performances and the new and innovative ways physically distanced audiences could interact with one another (Live Chat being a prominent example), perhaps the most interesting feature of Allred's essay is the use of word 'congregation' (p. 69) when describing online audiences. What emerges most starkly from this essay is the argument that the shift to the online sphere created a strong sense of community — perhaps even stronger than that of traditional, in-person performances pre (and now post) pandemic. Allred's use of the term 'congregation' features multiple times throughout the book and is employed by many of its contributors, implying that amidst the horrors and the uncertainty of the pandemic, online theatre signified a safe, and almost quasi-religious space, in ways that conventional theatre could not.

The second half of Part One develops the theoretical considerations of its first three essays by analysing specific examples of prominent lockdown performances of Shakespeare. In their chapter, 'Creation Theatre and Big Telly's *The Tempest*: Digital Theatre and the Performing Audience, Pascale Aebischer and Rachael Nicholas explore Creation Theatre and Big Telly's online production of *The Tempest*. Declaring it to be a 'novel form of performance' (p. 99), Aebischer and Nicholas's essay highlights the rapidity with which theatre companies (often independent companies doing it for the love of theatre as well as the chance to perform in a time of theatrical unemployment) were able to mount a production (often on a shoestring) and get it on its online feet. As to why many of these newly formed online companies turned to Shakespeare in the first instance, Aebischer and Nicholas suggest that 'audiences were able to try out a new medium, safe in the knowledge that, as a Shakespeare play, they would be on tried and tested ground in terms of content and narrative.' (p. 104) However, once these

companies and audiences became increasingly attuned to the protocols and etiquette of performing and spectating Shakespeare online, as Erin Sullivan goes on to argue in her chapter, 'Immersion in a Time of Distraction: 'The Under Presents: *Tempest*', theatrical boundaries began to become increasingly obscure. Sullivan's examination of an immersive and interactive production of *The Tempest* highlights a move from some companies into the more experimental worlds of Virtual Reality (VR) and online gaming. These *avant-garde* forays into uncharted waters certainly have their critical detractors, yet Sullivan (and later case studies in Part Two), provides provoking analysis of theatre continuing to evolve despite the huge obstacles and limitations it was forced to endure.

The final chapter of Part One, consists of not an essay, but rather an interview between academic David Sterling Brown and writer and Shakespeare practitioner Ben Crystal. The first in a series of interviews the book has to offer, the conversation between Brown and Crystal is a fascinating first-hand account of having to find new ways to bring Shakespeare to the world. Discussing his online production of *Twelfth Night*, Crystal claims the play to be 'a stunning blend of comedy and tragedy' (p. 138), perfectly suited for finding humour as a way to cope during a tragic period of human history. Clearly an advocate for the online medium, Crystal, like Allred, refers to the community created in this new online sphere as congregational, ending Part One of the book with the notion that these new and pioneering modes of bringing Shakespeare to the online masses to be a force for good and a new evolution in the future direction of theatre post-pandemic.

Part Two of the book (Case Studies), is perhaps where the book truly breaks new ground. Building on the examples in Part One, this section of book provides six case studies of notable online productions of Shakespeare from across the globe. Through interviews with the volume's editors, actors and directors from prominent online theatre companies such as The Show Must Go Online, Creation, and Big Telly, all offer personal accounts of their experiences, both artistic and practical, of mounting productions of Shakespeare (often from their own homes). Allred and Broadribb's conversation with members of The Show Must Go Online is keen to highlight, as are other practitioners interviewed in the book, that the move to online performance was 'a boundary-pushing idea' (p. 151) and wanted to emphasise that their performances were in no way a simulacrum of in-person performance: 'We ditched the idea that this replaces in-person theatre. Zoom is a venue all of its own, and everything was geared towards the format' (p. 151). Cast member Lisa Hill-Corley's assertion here is one that is celebrated throughout the multiple interviews in this section of the book, again reinforcing the book's thesis that the Covid-19 pandemic heralded the birth of a *new*

mode of performance and not simply a sticking plaster until corporeal performances could once again resume.

This section of the book is interesting due to the esoteric nature of the productions examined and discussed. It is not simply an exploration of traditionalist Shakespearean productions translated on to the screen, but a celebration of all the experimental and, occasionally, head-scratching ideas that were, by and large, embraced by their online followings. To criticise these impassioned interviews would be a disservice to the work created by all those involved under extremely trying circumstances. One wonders, however, whether six in-depth interviews veered towards repetition on occasion: the same sentiments often being expressed, albeit in different words, by different theatre companies presented as a succession of transcripts in this section of the book. For me, Chapter 12, the last of the case studies, proved to be the most informative, this time Sullivan interviewing Andrew James Hartley, Sarah Hatchuel and Yu Umemiya, three teachers who recount how they each used online performances of Shakespeare to alter and adapt their pedagogy in a time when educational establishments also had to move their activities online. Umemiya, discussing her Japanese students' opportunity to record their performances and upload them online, comments that, despite not gaining viewing figures in any way 'viral', their work gained international exposure it would not have otherwise received, declaring that this 'could not have happened without the digital medium' (p. 214).

The third and final section of the book, entitled 'Lockdown Digital Arts: An Extended Year in Review', is a comprehensive and painstakingly assembled catalogue not just of Shakespeare, but any online performances worthy of mention in this new canon of pandemic-produced digital theatre. Covering the fourteen months between March 2020 and May 2021, this section is divided into four parts, each corresponding to the successive seasons of the year and chronologising the myriad performances online ranging from the amateur actor recording alone in their bedroom to the professional companies such as the National Theatre and their weekly Thursday night screenings on YouTube. What this final section of the book succeeds most in doing, however, is making it clear that whilst the odds were certainly stacked against the arts industry and the world's governments were prioritising other considerations, the arts still managed to thrive and, without the ability to go online, the world would have been artistically poorer for it. Esoteric performances or not, what the book rightly celebrates is that in times of crisis, creativity can thrive and flourish, and the significance of technology is only going to become greater as we move forward into a post-pandemic age.

In summary, Allred, Broadbribb and Sullivan have created an essential work for the study of not only Shakespeare on screen, but theatre more widely. As those in the performing arts had to adapt due to a global pandemic, so too will those in academia who are now faced with a 'brave new world', to borrow from Shakespeare himself, of performance material to examine in the light of changing technologies and innovations. Likewise, this fascinating collection of essays will appeal to those from a range of disciplines eager to explore what is ultimately a celebration of creatives fighting to make sense of the precariousness of the Covid-19 pandemic.