

Teaching Shakespeare at the Live Cinema Broadcast

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While the recording of Shakespearean theatrical performance for the screen has an extensive history (Buchanan 2009; Wyver 2019), the more recent phenomenon of event cinema screenings of theater productions has occasioned a sea change in the way Shakespearean performance is consumed. As documented in the collection *Shakespeare and the “Live” Theatre Broadcast Experience* (Aebischer, Greenhalgh, and Osborne 2018), the arrival of the National Theatre Live (NT Live, from 2009) and Royal Shakespeare Company Live From Stratford-upon-Avon (RSC Live, from 2013) programs has precipitated a growing number of direct-to-cinema broadcasts—both live relays and pre-recorded “as live” films edited together from one or more performances—whose aesthetic, commercial, and formal properties are a burgeoning research area for performance scholars (see Barker 2012).

The nature and scope of these broadcasts have changed over time. Initially, NT Live was accessible only via cinemas, with screenings also made available to schools as part of a limited program (Way 2017; Nicholas 2019). RSC Live, by contrast, immediately began making its recordings available for general retail as DVDs and Blu-Rays. Both programs have more recently made selections of their earlier broadcasts (often lightly edited) available on educational platforms such as Digital Theatre Plus and Drama Online, as well as broadcasting some for

general viewing via YouTube and other platforms during the early stages of the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. Other Shakespeare companies have experimented with different models. Shakespeare's Globe have produced live cinema and television broadcasts and pre-edited "as live" films for DVD and online retail; the Kenneth Branagh Company has broadcast productions to cinema that remain unavailable in any other medium; the Donmar Warehouse filmed its 2016 "Shakespeare Trilogy" and broadcast one production to cinemas while releasing the others on DVD and online; and other companies such as Cheek by Jowl and Forced Entertainment have sidestepped cinemas entirely and offered live web-streaming of productions (Nicholas 2018).

The sheer range and quality of live-streamed productions has created an invaluable pedagogic resource, and the availability of so much of the above content "on demand" is particularly important for the teaching of Shakespeare performance in areas that do not enjoy convenient access to theaters. While Jessica Winston's article in this roundtable explores some current uses of these resources in the classroom, in this article I will focus on the cinema as a venue for attending live Shakespeare performance. Particularly as there is a growing sense of expectation among audiences that these broadcasts will find their way onto on-demand platforms, it is important to recognize that changing platforms significantly alter the pedagogic opportunities that broadcast theater offers. As the cinema remains the initial and primary (and sometimes only) site of reception for many of these programs, a consideration of the challenges and opportunities that teaching Shakespeare at the cinema broadcast offers is long overdue.

The Cinema Stream as Live Performance

While teaching at the University of Nottingham, I regularly arranged excursions to see cinema broadcasts on two of my courses: the undergraduate option “Shakespeare and his Contemporaries on the Stage” and the Masters-level course “Shakespeare: Text, Stage, Screen.” Both courses have dynamic curricula which are adjusted each year to fit around two or three current productions of Shakespeare taking place in the UK. Both courses also privilege skills training in their learning outcomes, supporting students in developing the tools to respond to live Shakespearean performance and bring their own concerns to bear in acts of interpretation.

On both courses, the cinema broadcast is offered alongside live theater visits. Part of the rationale for this is economic; a trip to a local cinema is much cheaper than a coach trip to a more distant theater, and thus allows the group to see a larger selection of performances over the duration of the course. But if pure economics were the only concern, it would of course be even cheaper to give students access to recordings of previously broadcast productions, such as those available on Drama Online or Digital Theatre Plus. To justify its inclusion alongside theater visits, the cinema broadcast must offer unique value. This value is what the broadcast event offers to the pedagogical aims of the course in terms of exploring (1) experientiality; (2) collective learning; and (3) ephemerality. I must stress from the outset that it is not my intention to argue that cinema broadcasts are *better* as a pedagogic resource than online or DVD recordings; indeed, the superior accessibility of recordings, especially for students who for any reason are unable to attend a live event or in regions without convenient access to live or broadcast venues, makes the latter often much more appropriate. However, live broadcast events

and recordings of previously broadcast performances offer significantly *different* pedagogic opportunities which should be borne in mind.

(1) *Experientiality*: while the aesthetics and formal qualities of the cinema broadcast are significantly different to those of a live theater production, the cinemagoing experience offers a productive approximation of the theatergoing experience. Audiences arrive and congregate ahead of a given start time; they experience the event in synchronous real time; and perhaps most importantly, students experience the screening alongside the general public.¹ While a key feature of live broadcasts is the sound of the in-theater audience, the effect of being among a cinema audience who are also responding audibly and visually to the on-screen performance is markedly different to that of watching the broadcast in isolation. This has been most noticeable in student observation of audience responses that differ from their own, such as laughter at instances of casual misogyny on the stage. When this reaction is observed on a recorded broadcast, student reactions tend to be detached, observational; when this reaction is observed among an audience that the students are part of, more invested questions of perceived complicity and discomfort emerge. The co-presence of the live cinema audience invites the student to reflect on the “eventness” of the broadcast (Way 2017: 392-3).

(2) *Collective learning*: when recorded broadcasts are made available to students on demand, they are able to undertake a form of detailed close analysis, pausing and rewinding the recording in order to construct nuanced accounts of choices that they are able to re-watch and check. Teaching recordings of live broadcasts in this way has been exciting, especially on other courses focused on film analysis, where this kind of repeat viewing is encouraged. This mode

also appeals to students who are taking English degrees, mimicking the kinds of close analysis of a stable textual object that are familiar from working with print materials.

The one-off streaming event, however, requires a different kind of collective work around memory; as Peter Holland suggests, “the experience of performance is also a structuring of memory; leaving the theatre at the end of the performance is already to be aware of the excess of forgetfulness” (2006: 211). Having seen the screening in the cinema, the students are usually unable to see the broadcast a second time.² Especially for students whose assessment involves writing about the screening, the ability to accurately recall details of the screening is regularly a source of anxiety (though notably, usually only *before* the screening). I instead position this as an opportunity: none of us, including the tutor, will be able to remember all aspects of the screening we have attended in forensic detail, and thus the responsibility is shared. Students are invited to spend time in the interval, on the return coach trip, in class, and via discussions amongst themselves, sharing and pooling their memories. Importantly, in an educational context where students are largely assessed on the basis of individual projects and essays, this also asks students to become less protective about their own insight, and to decenter authority within the classroom (indeed, students correcting me on my own misremembering of performance moments often marks a turning point in the class’s confidence in ownership of their own knowledge).

(3) *Ephemerality*. The increased use of professionally filmed live broadcasts as a reusable archive version of a production risks blurring the lines between the unstable, ephemeral *event* of a performance, and the stable, enduring *text* of a film, concepts perhaps best articulated in Diana Taylor’s categories of *repertoire* (embodied memory) and *archive* (documented memory) (2003:

19-20). Thus, while the recorded version is available for close analysis along the same lines as film, those serendipitous and accidental features of the live broadcast—from wobbly cameras to dropped lines to fumbled props, some of which are edited out of the archival recordings, some of which are retained—risk being read as inadequacies in an otherwise stable production, rather than as features of the ephemeral performance event. The eventness of the one-night-only live cinema broadcast invites students to engage appropriately and generously with the contingencies of a live performance event.

Emphasis on these features of the cinema stream positions the stream as an equivalent to live theater. For pedagogic and assessment purposes, while the cinema broadcast has important formal differences to the in-person performance event—which I will discuss further in the next section—the eventness, non-repeatability, and ephemerality of the screened live production allows students to be assessed on the same skill sets as those writing about a theater visit. However, this is an *equivalence*; it does not mean that the live broadcast should be treated as *identical* to the stage production. To prepare students to attend a live cinema streaming, training in some of the basic features of the medium is essential.

The Cinema Stream as Live Film

Much of the published work on live broadcasts of Shakespeare has offered detailed close readings of the film grammar of these streamed productions. However, these analyses are usually based on recordings that the researcher is able to re-watch at leisure, and thus the detail of the analysis can be intimidatingly off-putting to students who are only able to attend a screening

once. On the other hand, to deny the mediating role performed by the screen director and the conventions of the live broadcast risks inviting the students to treat the broadcast as a poor or second-hand relation to the theatrical production. The remainder of this article offers suggestions for helping students develop fluency in aspects of live cinema broadcasts that they can aim to be alert to during their experience of an event; and, in doing so, to become critically aware of the acts of mediation that govern the form.

While the literature on live theater broadcasts is already too extensive to survey in this short article, teachers will find it productive to consider them as a form of adaptation in their own right, rather than as a mere conduit to the theater performance that is the “true” object of study. Linda Hutcheon reminds us that “adaptation is a kind of extended palimpsest and, at the same time, often a transcoding into a different set of conventions” (2013: 33), and it is this “transcoding” that is at stake in re-reading the performance event through the specific conventions of live filming. Hutcheon’s model of a “reception continuum” that moves “from a production focus to a re-production one” (2013: 171) is an especially useful way of perceiving the unique palimpsestic form of the live theater broadcast, in which the “here” of the theater is explicitly juxtaposed in the introductions to these events with the “there” of a worldwide cinema audience, drawing self-conscious attention to the interplay of different media conventions. The juxtaposition of the theatrical performance with the framing of the cinema event provides a productive space for engaging with a specific and explicit method of transmedia adaptation.

(1) *Paratexts*. Most cinema broadcasts, especially those from NT Live and RSC Live, are accompanied by paratextual materials that take the place of traditional theater programs.

Paratexts, in the influential language of Gerard Genette, are those liminal staging areas surrounding the text that exert “an influence on the public, an influence that – whether well or poorly understood and achieved – is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it” (1997: 2). In the case of live theater broadcasts, such paratexts include, but are not limited to, pre-recorded documentaries, live and recorded interviews with cast and creative team members, and framing materials that position the production within the company’s history and output; significantly, these paratexts are usually unique to the cinema screening, with some occasionally preserved on DVD recordings or YouTube as separate stand-alone videos, but most no longer available. While these paratexts are often compared to the kinds of material contained within theater programs, the mode of delivery and reception accords them a different and more privileged role; audience members must physically opt out of experiencing the paratexts by leaving the venue if they wish to ignore them. Elizabeth Sharrock’s work (2022) offers a comprehensive breakdown and analysis of the formal and interpretive qualities of these paratexts.

The limited availability of paratexts outside of the cinema event makes it especially challenging to prepare students for the influential role they play in shaping interpretation, and so a little advance preparation in documentary aesthetics can be invaluable. One exercise I have found helpful is to play students a brief clip from Al Pacino’s documentary film *Looking for Richard* (1996). In the clip, the actor Frederic Kimball remonstrates with Pacino about Pacino’s predilection for ceding interpretive authority to academics, who enjoy the privilege of direct-to-camera address throughout the film—before the film cuts abruptly and somewhat unfairly to the

scholar Emrys Jones, who is shown fumbling over a question to which he does not know the answer. The explicit contestation and subversion of the talking-heads trope of documentaries draws attention to the ways in which film aims to depict authority as unmediated. Discussion of the framing of authority then leads to three questions for students to bear in mind when watching the paratexts: (a) Who is delivering the paratexts? (b) What authority are they being given? (c) How do they want you to interpret the production? Having these questions in mind invites students to reflect critically on how the paratexts attempt to govern and direct audience interpretation.

(2) *Screen direction*. The most obvious differences students observe between attending a live theater production and attending a cinema broadcast are (a) the ability to see close detail on the stage that they are usually too distant to observe in a theater (usually framed as a positive) and (b) the inability to choose which aspects of the stage to focus on (usually framed as a negative). The latter in particular is often experienced as a failing of the broadcast, rather than as a positive mode of adaptation. Attending the 2019 cinema broadcast of the RSC Live *Measure for Measure* (directed for the stage by Gregory Doran and for the screen by Robin Lough), I and a group of students observed the significance of the choice to leave Isabella alone onstage at the end, crying out in anguish; attending the same production in the theater when it toured to Nottingham some months later, we were surprised to find that the Duke was also visible on stage at the end, but had been excluded in the broadcast version by the screen director. Rather than perceiving this as a deficiency of the production, I offer this anecdote to students as an example

of the interpretive role of the broadcast, the screen director presenting a particular reading of this moment through the close-up on a single character.

Building an instructor or tutor's confidence in the grammar of the live broadcast is an important first step, and Erin Sullivan (2017) offers the most detailed and accessible account of camerawork and directorial conventions in the major cinematic broadcast programs, with particular attention to how camera and editing construct theatrical space on film. As well as being an invaluable introduction to teachers looking to develop confidence in the specifics of this form, I have found this a useful article for discussing with students, especially at graduate level. To put this into practice as a training exercise, I use a clip that the RSC has made available on YouTube from Act 4, Scene 1 of its 2013 production of *Richard II* (stage director Gregory Doran; screen director Robin Lough). I deliberately do not teach this play on either of the courses in question and instead treat the clip as a cold example for the purpose of focusing on the screen conventions.

This clip offers several illustrations of simple conventions addressed by Sullivan: the slow camera movement; the oscillation between long shots showing the whole space of the stage and mid-shots on actors' bodies; and the sparing use of cuts, which privilege lengthy shots of the actors performing live. The camera work is largely unobtrusive, designed not to draw attention to itself, but students can quickly appreciate how the shot choices work to contextualize the space—dominated by Bolingbroke's throne and watching courtiers—and then focus on the individuals within that space. On a second watch, I invite the students, who are mostly unfamiliar with the play, to develop readings of how the camerawork tells a story. Observations usually

include the extent to which the camera follows David Tennant's Richard, both accentuating his personal charisma and suggesting that he, rather than the throne, is a center of power; the deliberate extreme close-up on the crown at the moment when both Richard and Bolingbroke have their hands on it, stressing the significance of this object; and the use of end-on shots that place the throne central in the shot and frame Richard and Bolingbroke in relation to the seat of power.

Simple exercises of this kind—which I have also experimented with presenting in the form of live commentary over a clip for the benefit of distance learners—help develop critical awareness of the interpretive potential of the camera that can then be drawn upon in watching the live event. While in practice student essays on the cinema broadcasts still focus predominantly on the choices made in the production, advance training of this kind has produced a greater level of engagement with the screen production's adaptational role, and enhanced sensitivity to the constraints and conventions of the form.

Perhaps more importantly, however, the hybrid form of a one-off event that is reimagined for the screen gives students an introduction to social responsibility. Foregrounding the role of the screen broadcast in shaping students' interpretations of the production, and encouraging students to collectively explore the implications of that mediation through shared memory and peer conversation, helps students develop a skillset that is more widely applicable to the mediation of news events and public affairs. It invites students to learn to trust one another, to try out ideas and risk being wrong, to check their memory of an event with reference to the

experience of others. It invites students to critique the way the world is being presented to them, and to build confidence in their own subjective experience as part of a collective.

This article was originally written at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic; at the time of completing it in 2021, cinemas and theaters in the UK are beginning to tentatively reopen their doors to socially distanced audiences. The extent to which collective viewing of live performance, whether in theaters or cinemas, will be viable in the near future remains to be determined; however, this article insists on the importance of understanding the specific value both of the form and of the medium of reception on student experience, in the hope that collective reception and interpretation can continue to be embedded as part of the drama student's essential skill set.

Notes

¹ Cinema audiences for live broadcasts vary enormously; in Nottingham I used the Broadway cinema in Nottingham which usually sells out a screen of several hundred seats for its Shakespeare broadcasts. Rachael Nicholas's work on cinema audiences addresses venues with more sparse attendance (2019).

² On occasion, students are able to attend an Encore screening of the broadcast on another date.

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