"Shakespeare is for Everyone": Teaching Regional Productions through the Digital Performance Archive

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The past decade has witnessed increasing critical interest in local iterations of Shakespeare in performance, from adaptations around the world to regional American shows (cf. Orkin; Edmondson; O'Leary and Yeo). Within these venues, performances become an exercise in artistic identity-making through ownership of the global phenomenon of "Shakespeare," a community endeavor that is embedded, both geographically and anthropologically, within the local or regional context (Brokaw). At the same time, these productions challenge and expand our sense of Shakespeare's work, frequently through integrating local visual, aural, or cultural appropriations: a regional colloquialism dropped into a line or a local landmark recreated onstage (O'Leary and Yeo 323).

For teachers of Shakespeare without easy access to the stages of New York, London, or Stratford, this shift to the local makes good sense: the local live production is a common feature of Shakespeare syllabi. And yet, despite this ubiquity, our approach to teaching local live performances is curiously undertheorized. In critical work and classrooms alike, performance pedagogy instead focuses on student performance and filmed productions (Winston 290-291). There are, of course, good reasons for these pedagogical approaches. Acting out scenes invites students to grapple with the linguistic and interpretive challenges of the written text while

simultaneously awakening them to its embodied politics and emotional capabilities (Thompson and Turchi). Comparing filmed productions clarifies meaning by demonstrating one or more performative options (Eggers 273). However, both approaches treat performance less as an object of analysis in its own right than a supportive feature that posits the written text as fundamentally "Shakespeare," while performed texts are coded as "interpretations." While there is some validity to this idea, an uncritical acceptance of it endorses the belief in an "authentic" or "original" written text that performance merely explicates. Taken too far, this approach not only elides the collaborative messiness of early modern writing, but also relegates performance, in the words of W.B. Worthen, to "a 'presentation' of something that already exists, a '*kind of commentary*' supplementing (or degrading) the written work of art" (75).

For our students, the result can be an implicit devaluing of local live performances, which are gauged against an unexamined ideal. This ideal claims a stake in the written text, as explicated by what Martin Orkin has influentially called "the Shakespeare metropolis": major European or North American productions and the cultural and academic apparatus that surrounds them (1). Accustomed to the high polish of Hollywood films, students may equate professional talent with artistic merit, and so overlook the cultural work of community theatre. Student expectations may also be influenced by a desire to recover or retain an "original" production, or even authorial intention. These expectations often result in style preferences that are based on a limited or inaccurate understanding of early modern stage practices.

The task for regional educators, then, is to help students lay aside these preferences in order to see the performance as *itself* the textual object, one that does not merely interpret

meaning but also creates it (see O'Leary and Yeo). To accomplish this task, we must slow down student encounters with the live performance. For several years, my colleagues and I have been attempting to do just that through the Nashville Shakespeare Performance Archive (https://shakespeare.belmont.edu/), an online archive built and curated by our students at Belmont University. In this project, students collect visual and audio material from the Nashville Shakespeare Festival's annual productions and build a website archiving each year's performance. In the process, students catalog video footage, interviews, photos, musical scores, set models, costume sketches, and other elements of the production. My colleagues and I argue elsewhere that this project, particularly in its early years, emphasized multimodal analysis and helped students become aware of both the interpretive features of archival work and the adaptive capabilities of Shakespeare in performance (McDonald, Overall, and Yeo 132–35, 139–40). However, as the project has developed in recent years, I wanted to challenge student notions of Shakespearean authenticity more directly and encourage students to consider productions as texts in their own right, and so in 2019-20 we redesigned the project. This article discusses the key strategies and learning outcomes of the 2019-20 redesign. I argue that, in addition to challenging authenticity, the redesigned project helps students identify how regional Shakespeare contributes to local artistic identity. This approach finally democratizes Shakespeare for our students, moving them away from the notion of an "original" Shakespeare and toward a better understanding of Shakespeare's work as a collaborative worldwide endeavor.

History and Overview

The Nashville Shakespeare Performance Archive was first built by our students in 2016 and each successive year has added to it. Launched through the support of an NEH-funded Folger Institute mini-grant, the project spans two classes and involves three faculty members: myself, early modernist Marcia McDonald, and digital rhetorician Joel Overall. Through this collaboration, students collect and curate audio and visual material from a local Shakespeare production and build a set of webpages that archive and interpret the performance each year.

The project follows a relatively stable chronology. Students in the Shakespeare class class (taught in some years by McDonald and other years by myself) begin by watching the production at the beginning of the Fall semester and then divide into groups based on their interest in various production elements such as set design, costumes, music, etc. In these groups, students review production photos provided by the Nashville Shakespeare Festival, record interviews, photograph set mockups and costume sketches, and write stage histories and academic performance reviews. After collecting this data, students in the Shakespeare class annotate it and turn it in before writing a final reflection at the end of the semester. In the Spring semester, students in the Digital Literacies class (taught by Overall) learn HTML coding, video editing, and web design before using the performance data to build a set of webpages for the play. As part of this process, each student drafts a proposed logo and website design that reflects each year's performance aesthetics, for instance coloring a logo with the same vibrant hues of the set in order to highlight the whimsy of a comedy. Once a final logo and design are chosen by student vote, the students divide into groups that each create a webpage focused on a specific

element of the show. Each webpage features edited videos, photos, and copy text (Figure 1 and

Figure 2). The end result is a set of pages added each year that highlight different elements of

that year's production. The two classes are not "linked": students may take one or both if they

choose, and in fact most students only enroll in one class.[1]

Figure 1. Screenshot from "Homepage." "The Tempest," *Nashville Shakespeare*

Performance Archive, **Fall 2019, shakespeare.belmont.edu/tempest/. Licensed under CC**

BY-NC-ND 4.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode). No changes have

been made to this image. Photo credit Malkin, Rick. Prospero. Nashville Shakespeare

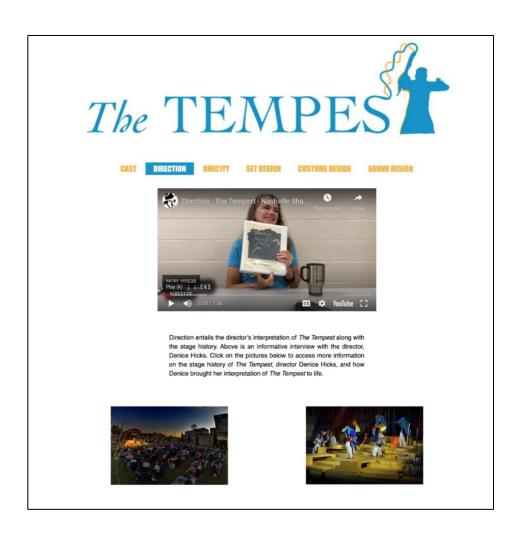**Festival, Nashville Tennessee.**

Figure 2. Screenshot from Lanz, Alexandra, Meg Barron, and Kayleigh Rucinski.

"Direction." "The Tempest," *Nashville Shakespeare Performance Archive*, **Fall 2019,**

shakespeare.belmont.edu/tempest/direction.html. Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

(creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode). No changes have been made to this

image. Photo credit Malkin, Rick. *The Tempest* **at ONEC1TY and the masque from** *The*

*Tempest***. Nashville Shakespeare Festival, Nashville Tennessee.**

Redesign

The 2019-20 redesign of this format coincided with the Nashville Shakespeare Festival's late summer production of *The Tempest*. The production had several features commented on by the students, but perhaps the most notable of these was the venue itself: ONEC1TY, a mixed-use property with an amphitheater stage surrounded by walkways, landscaping, and residential and commercial buildings. The stage is crowned by an architectural 3D printed sculpture, a geometric canopy arching 20 feet over the stage and narrowing to three pillars at its base ([Figure 3](#)). The structure's design leaves the backstage space open to audience view, and so a notable feature of the show was the near-continual presence of actors circulating amid the landscaping and the audience. While some students felt this placed them "on the island" with the characters, others found it distracting to ward off a popcorn-begging sprite or to watch a forlorn Ferdinand sitting atop his wood pile when not onstage.

Figure 3. Malkin, Rick. Photograph of *The Tempest* at ONEC1TY. Nashville Shakespeare Festival, Nashville, Tennessee.

To archive this play, our redesign began by rebranding the Shakespeare class, offered in previous years as a survey with the title "Shakespeare: Representative Plays." The rebranded class, "Shakespeare on Stage and Screen," focused on performance, covering six plays rather than ten. The class included readings on stage history, adaptation, and global Shakespeare, as well as work on archives by Jacques Derrida, Amy Earhart, and Barbara Hodgdon. Required reading also featured at least two full filmed productions for each play drawn from a diverse

selection of Hollywood productions, staged performances, modern-language adaptations, and translations. Most plays featured at least one well-known or conventional production alongside a nontraditional version to illuminate how less mainstream performances reshape the work of Shakespeare in unexpected ways. An extended unit on *Macbeth*, for instance, allowed students to compare Rupert Goold's 2010 production alongside global adaptations such as Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1967) and Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* (2004), as well as consider marginalized productions such as Tom Magill's *Mickey B* (2007), a modern-language adaptation written and acted by people incarcerated in Northern Ireland's Maghaberry Prison. Students also investigated productions for which there is limited or no access to full filmed versions, such as Emursive's production of Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* (2011) and Manit Sriwanichpoom's *Shakespeare Must Die* (2012). These investigations gave students firsthand experience of a production through its artefacts, informing their understanding of the work of an archive and challenging their notion of what constitutes "performance" beyond "the Shakespeare metropolis."

Another important element of our redesign included the decision to offer both the Shakespeare and the Digital Literacies classes concurrently rather than consecutively. We facilitated two "concept and design" meetings between the students during the semester, which solidified the Shakespeare students' roles as interpreters and creators as they articulated their artistic vision for the archive. In their final reflections, the Shakespeare students often remarked on how the archive did or did not "capture" their sense of the production. One student, for instance, expressed disappointment that the design for her page departed from her idea of the

"family-friendly and appealing" show and instead featured "more serious elements of the plot and characters." This back-and-forth between the two classes ultimately enabled both populations of students to articulate how the archive represents and mediates the show through images, graphic design, music, and text. As they did so, students began to realize that the archive itself creates a meaningful experience for its audience that alters the production it attempts to preserve (see McDonald, Overall, and Yeo 139).

Student Learning Outcomes

Challenging Authenticity

One of the earliest and most pronounced student learning outcomes from this class is a revised understanding of Shakespearean authenticity. In their final reflections, students commented frequently on their evolving conceptions of what constitutes "Shakespeare." Several students, for instance, noted they entered the class with a preference for period settings and costumes. One student remarked that before she took the class she evaluated Shakespearean productions against "a strict sense of renaissance-themed productions," which biased her against "abstract performances." Other students remarked that their early expectations of Shakespeare in performance relied on a mistaken notion of authorial intention: "I came into this class believing that to do Shakespeare well, one had to find and stay true to Shakespeare's original intent for the production. That's the only right way to do it, right? Well, it is not nearly so simple." These students substituted their expectations with a more expansive sense of Shakespeare in performance. One student who initially envisioned Shakespeare productions as involving

"period-costumed" actors noted: "Now when I think of Shakespeare I think of an all-black cast playing a politically charged *Much Ado about Nothing* in Central Park or Alexis Denisof doing push-ups in black and white to impress his Beatrice." In other words, these students substituted expectations enmired in a mistaken notion of historicity or intentionality for an openness to performance diversity.

Contextualized Performance

This relinquishing of an "authentic" Shakespeare paved the way for a new understanding of performance as shaped within a local—sometimes hyperlocal—context. Students are awakened to this fact through interviews, an activity that we retained from the original course design. While students often interview cast and crew members as part of their group work, we always invite a key member of the production for a whole-class interview. For *The Tempest*, we interviewed Denice Hicks, executive artistic director of the Nashville Shakespeare Festival and director of the show. Several students commented on how their conversation with Hicks enabled them to reevaluate elements of the show, including the offstage presence of the actors:

> In her interview, Hicks stresses the importance of immersive theater and interaction with the audience while producing Shakespeare. This is clearly seen in her creative decisions. In her interpretation of *The Tempest*, the spirits roam around the crowd and interact with the audience . . . Since [ONEC1TY] doesn't provide a backstage, audience members feel as if they are part of the production and not just observing.

This student came to understand how the infrastructural limitations of ONEC1TY offered opportunities for a creative response in keeping with the mission and values of the company, emphasizing accessibility through audience engagement. Students came away from their conversation with Hicks understanding that, far from replicating an idealized version of the written text, Shakespeare productions converse just as often with their own immediate contexts as meaning is shaped by and within them.

Regional Shakespeare

Given this new understanding of localized performance context, it is perhaps unsurprising that students also reassessed their valuation of the artistic work of the regional company, viewing regional productions—and the archives that memorialize them—as a form of grassroots artistic activism. From the first iteration of this project in 2016, we have emphasized for students that a Nashville performance archive shines a light on Southern contributions to global understandings of Shakespeare in performance (McDonald, Overall, and Yeo 132-33). One assignment from the 2019 project redesign, adapted and augmented from previous years, invited students to consider the mission of the Nashville Shakespeare Performance Archive in relation to the missions of larger, more centralized archives. In their responses students articulated how, as Christie Carson has pointed out, small-scale productions can be lost or overlooked in larger, more centralized collections (263). Students began asking questions about how and why some productions, like those in global archives or staged in major metropolises, are featured prominently in stage histories, while others, including regional productions like their own, are lost or overlooked.

While acknowledging regionality as a small-scale operation, students asserted that regional archives work not in competition with larger projects but rather as supplements and respondents to them. One student referenced Amy Earhart's distinction between large-scale and small-scale data sets in digital projects to explore the mission of regional archives:

> There are inequitable distributions between small-scale and large-scale data sets, since large-scale projects receive the proper funding. Small-scale data sets are more carefully curated but are often referred to as amateur projects . . . Earhart believes both forms of data sets are working to present and organize information and need to be treated as flip sides of the same argument . . . small-scale data sets are better at honoring the histories and specificities of the cultures represented due to more careful curation practices.

For this student, the task of the regional archive, akin to the task of regional Shakespeare, is thoughtful self-representation of a local community, a way of affirming Nashville's identity as an artistic and cultural force in the world. The thought is echoed by another student who noted that "archives are preserving performances all over the world. I fully believe Shakespeare is for everyone . . . I think an archive only enriches the world of Shakespeare and proves how his work is timeless." As another student suggested, the archive demonstrates "how Nashville is adding to the discussion of Shakespeare . . . our small city is engaging with an even bigger community."

Democratizing Shakespeare

These discussions gesture towards the possibility of a more inclusive scholarly understanding of Shakespeare in performance, something akin to what Matthew L. Jockers

argues results from a macroanalytical approach to texts (24-32). By creating and analyzing large-scale textual data sets, Jockers asserts that we might better contextualize canonical works by understanding their place in larger trends. We might also, he adds, uncover "details that are otherwise unavailable, forgotten, ignored, or impossible to extract" (Jockers 27). Translated to Shakespeare in performance, the kind of data embedded in local and global performance archives create the possibility of more comprehensive assessments of the diverse cultural engagements of Shakespeare in performance by expanding the focus of scholarly inquiry to include not only major productions but also global and local trends and influences (cf. Huang 42). Indeed, much information, including local popular tastes, regional aesthetics, and even large-scale shifts in artistic styles, cannot be obtained or accurately assessed without access to diverse and widespread production data.

Student articulations of this kind of scholarly inclusivity surfaced as a revelation: that Shakespeare's work is open to multihistorical, multicultural, and multilocal iterations. The phrase "Shakespeare is for everyone" echoed through several student reflections, serving as kind of marker for celebrating performance diversity. As one student writes:

This class has allowed me to have a completely new understanding of the work of Shakespeare and its amazing potential to impact people from any part of the world at any point in time. "Shakespeare" is no longer just a man who lived 400 years ago and wrote English in a strange way. "Shakespeare" is a small group of people performing *The Tempest* in Nashville, Tennessee; it is a Japanese director creating a radical adaptation of *Macbeth*; it is a TV show that turns the plays into 40-minute, Modern English episodes.

The work of Shakespeare is larger than the man, and this is something I never realized until this class.

For this student, the multivocality of Shakespeare enables her own local community of Nashville to participate in the larger project of democratizing Shakespeare. This project shifts meaning-making away from Shakespeare "the man," instead grounding performance in a richer understanding of multilocal meanings created through the interactions of culturally-embedded artists and audiences.

Conclusion

As we have developed this project over the past several years, we have been struck by how it mimics both the risks and opportunities of performance itself. As Alexa Alice Joubin, quoting Barbara Hodgdon, points out, "plays are open sites where 'textual obligation' meet 'performative options,'" and in much the same way, our own pedagogical work becomes and remains an open site of performative options that we continue to explore in collaboration with our students (Huang 48). Ultimately, the cultural specificity of Shakespeare in performance democratizes Shakespeare, and indeed theatre itself, through making Shakespeare's work both accessible and relevant to our students. It replaces the urge to compare productions of Shakespeare against an impossible and uncritical ideal text, and, rather than capturing *what* Shakespeare means, begins investigating *how* Shakespeare means. The result is a greater appreciation for regional Shakespeare: those smaller, nontraditional, and/or nonprofessional

productions that both shape and are shaped by their local contexts as they expand and redefine

our understanding of Shakespeare's work today.

Note

[1] For an expanded account of the initial years of this collaboration, along with specific

assignment descriptions, see McDonald, Overall, and Yeo.

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