

Bridging the Gap from the Performance-Based Classroom to Teaching Shakespeare at the Performance

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In a 2019 article on teaching Shakespeare with live theatre, Jessica Winston calls for “a robust pedagogical literature on teaching live performance,” stating that “conscientious framing” is necessary to avoid students perceiving attendance at live performance as “just an ancillary enrichment experience” (291, 292). This essay seeks to answer that call by sharing, as a case study, the “conscientious framing” I tested in a recent Shakespeare course at Xavier University. I articulate an approach to teaching Shakespeare *at* the performance, seeking to bridge the gap between performance-based in-class activities and critically-engaged in-person attendance at live performance, connecting these into a cohesive pedagogy.

In bridging this gap, I am working to bring together what I see as a more practical classroom approach with a more theoretical one. Performance-based in-class activities are a part of drama-based pedagogy that engages students studying dramatic texts in attending to those texts’ performance features and working to put the text “on its feet.” This often involves acting out scenes, cutting text or otherwise designing an imagined performance, viewing performances as a means of understanding text, etc. Performance studies, on the other hand, is a theoretical approach to considering the fact and experience of performance itself, and not just within the

theatre. In performance studies as it relates to drama, a student is invested not in the text being performed, but in the act of performance and how it intersects with other kinds of performances (political, athletic, religious, social, etc.). Bridging the gap between these involves exposing students both to the utility performance has in understanding the text, and to the fact of performance as its own experience, entire unto itself and part of a larger conversation about signification.

I am fortunate to teach in close proximity to a professional ensemble theatre, the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company [CSC].¹ As Marisa R. Cull has argued, place often defines the opportunities available to scholars, and geographical access is a privilege. Even with this privilege, I have repeatedly encountered challenges when incorporating CSC into my classes, the most immediate of which is funding. My department does not have the budget to cover purchasing students' play tickets, and I worry about obligating students to pay for tickets in addition to textbooks. While free online texts exist, I have yet to find one that includes the textual apparatus I feel necessary—modern spelling, line numbers, and both gloss and discursive footnotes. In 2019, I fortunately received a substantial grant from my university supporting a one-year institutional subscription to Bloomsbury Drama Online, giving my students free access to all texts for the course. Thus, I didn't feel I was imposing an unfair financial burden when I asked them to purchase tickets.² A usage study conducted by the library during that year has allowed them to justify adding the Drama Online Core Collection to their annual budget, which continues to be a benefit to my students.

To connect performance-oriented in-class approaches with the experience of seeing a live stage performance, I constructed a five-step in-class preparation, and a three-part post-performance process.³ In what follows, I lay out this process and describe its successes and areas for future improvement as I applied it to my course, which was titled “Shakespeare at the Theatre.” That course met twice a week in 75-minute sessions. We collectively read four plays—*The Tempest*, *Titus Andronicus*, *1 Henry IV*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. *Titus* and *Merry Wives* were the two Shakespeare plays in CSC’s schedule during that particular semester. I chose *The Tempest* because of the opportunity to contrast film and stage productions via streaming video, and *1 Henry IV* for the chance to follow Falstaff, Bardolph, Pistol, and Nym into *Merry Wives*.⁴ While four plays may seem a light load for a semester-long course, I found it necessary to limit my play selection in order to accommodate performance-based readings, production viewing, and other assignments.

Pre-performance Activities: Setting Up the Discussion

In our opening weeks of the course, I provided students with detailed historical information about early modern theatre. We polished our close reading skills and began applying them to analyzing performance by contrasting Julie Taymor’s *The Tempest* (2010) and the Globe on Screen *Tempest* (dir. Jeremy Herrin, 2013), focusing on the different ways stage and screen worked to craft a sense of magic and wonder in the production.⁵ With this initial set-up, we were ready to move into the pre-performance activities in more detail.

The **first** activity was the kind of text work one can readily find discussed in performance-based pedagogy material such as Joe Winston's *Transforming the Teaching of Shakespeare with the Royal Shakespeare Company*.⁶ Using a packet of exercises I received from the CSC teaching artists, I taught students about end-line caesuras, embedded stage directions, anchoring, etc. This gave them new entry points into the text, shored up their close readings, and demystified the work actors do performing Shakespeare.

Step **two** focused on reviewing live theatre. I put together readings, including selections from Mark Fisher's *How to Write About Theater*; editor Kevin Quarmby's reviewer guidelines from *Scene: Reviews of Early Modern Drama*⁷; several recent reviews from *Shakespeare Bulletin*, *The Shakespeare Newsletter*, and *Early Modern Culture*; and the performance history section of the Arden third series introduction to *The Tempest*.⁸ The reviews and performance history opened students' minds to what was possible in performance, while the guidelines taught them the conventions of academic reviews. Reviews focus student attention on the conventions of engaging *performance*, as separate and distinct from the conventions of engaging *text*. The two most important elements of engaging performance that I emphasized were crafting and articulating their response to performance critically beyond simply expressing praise or distaste, and recognizing that performance exists in many realms beyond the verbal or textual.

The **third** element of my pre-performance approach is a common technique: I embed performance into every discussion of the text. For example, while reading *Titus Andronicus*, I asked my students how Titus kills Lavinia, and then asked students to perform their suggestions as we discussed what was at stake in each choice—the physicality, the violence, the symbolism

involved in using a weapon or bare hands, and the (horrifying) possibility that one might choose to stage a Lavinia not fully complicit in her death. Discussions like this helped students learn how to read a performance, understand that multiple possible interpretations exist for any textual moment, and appreciate the ways in which actors, designers, and directors collaborate to construct a performance. Relatedly, I encouraged students to use performance to solve textual conundrums. When students were confused by the multiple secondary characters in *Merry Wives of Windsor*, I asked them to imagine they were cutting the play for performance. Each group was assigned a character or scene and asked what was at stake in cutting that character or scene.² This activity mimics the collaborative process of production design and helps students understand the possibilities inherent in performance as a means of solving textual problems.

Fourth, to leaven my performance-based approaches, I incorporated performance studies readings. I assigned the introductory chapter of W. B. Worthen's *Shakespeare Performance Studies*.¹⁰ My goal was to provide theory-based justification for decentering the text before students entered the theatre, preparing them to encounter the performance on its own terms. I have found most students treat theatre much as they do lecture: they see themselves as passive audience members, there to receive information, and not as interactive participants in an ongoing, mutable event. Discussing how Worthen presents Lehmann's description of postmodern theatre as a movement from *work* to *event* challenged this passivity. We spent considerable class time unpacking this quotation: "This framework of performative signification clearly extends well beyond the text, having more to do with the ideological structuring of an event in which the text plays a part" (Worthen 7). I provided context about CSC's new theatre,

built as part of a controversial revitalization of a neighborhood north of downtown Cincinnati, and invited the class to ponder what the ideological structure of a performance in this building might be.¹¹ I was hemmed in by time constraints. To have truly laid the community historical groundwork for this discussion would have required further limiting the course time spent on Shakespeare. But students did suggest in their course evaluations that they found themselves thinking more richly about theatre, attentive not just to what's happening to Shakespeare on stage, but also, to what's happening to Cincinnati and CSC through a production of a Shakespeare play.

To help frame performance as *event*, my **fifth** pre-performance activity is to discuss the physical space of the theatre. We compared the theatres students had been to with the very different spatial reality of early modern theatres. The concept of universal lighting, illustrated with images from the ASC's Blackfriars theatre, was particularly startling to my students, altering their understanding of performance as something observed by the audience but not engaged with by them. Here, I introduced Erika Fischer-Lichte's concept of the "autopoietic feedback loop" by which spectator response shapes performer action and performer action reshapes spectator response, thus creating the dynamic of live performance itself (Fischer-Lichte 38). Worthen urges us to think of theatre as "productive," in that "the theatre frames performance as an event, speaking not merely *to* the spectator but also *through* the spectator's agency in the performance" (Worthen 7). Discussing this with students, I underscored that, in attending theatre, they are not simply receiving information, nor is their only engagement "interpretation." Spectators have agency and can actively contribute to and shape performance.

This conversation primed my students to visit CSC’s Otto M. Budig Theatre. With its deep thrust stage and only six rows of seats, audience members can clearly see one another during the performance, and actors can clearly see audience members’ faces. For a theatre that seats 240, it feels incredibly intimate, and that intimacy exists not just between actor and audience member, but among and between audience members as well. Once my students had attended a performance, because they had the vocabulary of Worthen, Lehmann, and Fischer-Lichte, they were able to begin commenting on the power and dynamism of performance as a mutable event, shaped mutually by audience and performers.

Attending the Performance and Processing the Experience

At this point, having (1) engaged with the text using performance tools; (2) considered the conventions of writing theatre reviews; (3) consistently used performance to help interpret textual cruxes; (4) surveyed introductory performance studies readings and concepts; and (5) analyzed the significance of theatre’s physical space, we saw *Titus Andronicus* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. I required students to arrive thirty minutes before the show, giving them time to move through the lobby, consider the theatre’s geographic location in the city, and take field notes as they observed other patrons arriving. Students were instructed to consider accompanying materials—program, flyers, headshots in the lobby, etc.—as well as overheard conversations between other patrons and what the space of the theatre felt like before, during, and after the performance. These field notes generated a post-show reflective journal that addressed the physical space of the theatre and the experience of being an audience member. I

invited students to ponder the social experience of encountering Shakespeare in a theatre with two hundred other people, rather than alone, hunched over a text. They were to address the local nature of the theatre, asking to what extent this was recognizable as a *Cincinnati* performance.¹² These notes and journal entries constituted the **first** post-performance engagement (see [Appendix A](#)). The field notes not only helped students actively process the performance, but also engaged their attention with more than just what was happening on stage. The journal allowed them a space to work through their initial reactions without the constraint of formal critique.

As a **second** post-show writing assignment, students wrote a four-page paper analyzing a specific element or moment of the performance (see [Appendix B](#)). They were to consider how that element/moment surprised, delighted, or distressed them and examine what performance brought to the narrative that text alone could not. I emphasized that this was not merely intended to be a critique of how the performance interpreted the text, but instead, an opportunity to view the whole experience of the performance as meaningful in its own right.

The **third** post-production engagement comprised in-class discussions to help students process the experience of attending live theatre. I led these discussions with questions that focused student attention on the liveness, eventness, and mutability of the performances, such as, “Name one thing about the performance that was meaningful and unrelated to the text,” and “At any point, did the audience response change how you felt about what you were seeing onstage?” After discussing our second trip to the theatre, I asked students to email me a brief response to the prompt, “What does a Shakespeare theatre company contribute to its community?” The students spoke of the theatre as a mark of pride for the community that gave them insight into

Cincinnati as well as Shakespeare. Some argued that performances build empathy and commended the theatre's accessibility. Over and over, they emphasized how the physical space of the building and the makeup of the resident ensemble embodied community. I summarized the students' main recurring ideas and shared them with the class, framing a discussion within my institution's Jesuit values of solidarity and kinship while also putting their conviction that CSC was *building* community into conversation with performance studies notions centering performance as an *event* co-created by audience and artist. In connecting the class's ideas to a mission-centered value, I used language from the Jesuit tradition that my students, in their third or fourth year at Xavier, were already very familiar with. This helped cement the relevance of the course material to student lives.

Challenges and Opportunities

While the course worked well, there were definitely areas for improvement. Many plans were derailed by two obstacles. The first is obvious: time. I regularly cut more challenging elements (such as reading Fischer-Lichte) in favor of more instantly gratifying ones (asking students to view multiple recorded performances of a single play). The second major road block was more particular: I committed to teaching the Shakespeare plays CSC had on their fall 2019 schedule: *Titus Andronicus* and *Merry Wives of Windsor*. Odd bedfellows to be sure, but I almost always teach *Titus* in my Shakespeare class, and *Merry Wives* made for a compelling case study in staging less-familiar Shakespeare. I only belatedly considered the particular challenge viewing *Titus* live presented to my students. Several disclosed to me that they had experienced traumas

related to sexual violence. I ended up redesigning the lead-up to our first in-theatre experience by centering content warnings, preparatory discussions, alternate assignment opportunities and more.¹³

I was luckily able to bring together some of the hasty redesign with the original goals of the course, in particular through incorporating the participation of CSC actors. Maggie Lou Rader, who played Lavinia, shared a description of the blocking for some of the more violent scenes, so that students who wished could arm themselves in advance with an understanding of what the confrontation would look like. We spent class time discussing how actors work together physically, what a “fight call” means, and how minutely actor contact is choreographed. Patrick Earl Phillips, a talented local actor and former student of mine, was playing Demetrius, and he and Rader came together to visit my class. They spoke openly and honestly with my students about the work they do to craft the scenes the students were about to see performed. They described how they make decisions about movement, and how the design team works together to create an experience for the audience. Additionally, I shared with the visiting actors some of the principles we’d been learning about in our performance studies reading—performance as experience, as socially constructed, as dependent on audience—and asked them to respond. It helped immeasurably for students to hear actors’ takes on these principles. While I regret not assigning and discussing more performance studies readings, I am grateful for the opportunity to rethink approaching a potentially traumatizing performance, and to involve actors in our conversations about work vs. event and decentering the text.

Reflection

Did I succeed in getting my students to think about Shakespeare *at* the performance? In some ways, yes. Perhaps the greatest win for many students was a new appreciation of the physicality of performance. Much of our post-show debriefings centered on the compelling movements of the actors—their gestures, their smiles, their fights, and more. We discussed the awareness of bodily co-presence that being in the theatre space for live performance creates, and analyzed how it enhanced our appreciation for and understanding of the play.

In their course evaluations, I asked students to comment on what attending live performance added to the course. The majority of the responses focused on how performance enhanced their understanding of the text and its possible meanings, which, while nice to hear, still centers the text and only scratches the surface of what performance can do. A handful of students, though, noted some of the deeper impacts, such as creating a richer sense of community in the classroom and connecting the individual students more firmly with the local arts community. I am hopeful that future iterations of this class will evidence more rich responses like these. In particular, I think dedicating more class time to engaging the complex history of the arts in Cincinnati will make a difference here.

When I designed this course, I considered what Jessica Winston describes as a “continuum” of ideas about text and performance in relation to each other, which “prioritizes textual interpretation (at one end) and the contingencies of performance (at the other)” (297). I visualized myself at this latter end, beckoning the students toward an understanding of the eventness of performance. But in retrospect, I see I was actually deploying more of what

Winston calls “situated interpretation,” which “emphasizes the importance of the text” and “equally promotes the idea that performance emerges out of legacies and contexts that exist outside a text, including iterations of the play in editions, the history of the play in performance, the history of the performance company, the exigencies of the theatrical space, and broader political and social issues and trends” (300). Knowing this, I can more clearly enter into a future version of the class that prioritizes those “broader political and social issues” and the contextualized nature of a performance in Cincinnati.

This course design was experimental and is constantly under reconstruction. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced many new ways to think about performance and liveness, and university budget cuts loom that could threaten our access to Bloomsbury Drama Online. Regardless of what may come, I assert the value of this experience. As I refine this ambitious design, I continue to work toward bridging the gap from classroom discussions of performance to a critically engaged experience of live performance, as I feel this bridge is an undeniable good. In a July 2020 webinar, “Teaching Anti-Racism Through Shakespeare,” Ayanna Thompson argued we must connect Shakespeare to our students’ very real, contemporary concerns related to their lived experiences, or we risk him becoming yet another outdated statue to be torn down. I firmly believe that teaching Shakespeare *at* the performance is one way to do just this: to connect students’ classroom experiences of reading the text to an embedded and embodied experience engaging with the arts at work in a community. I hope that such experience cultivates in them the spirit of local arts activists and public scholars, engaged citizens invested in enriching the communities where they live.

Appendix A: Performance Journal Assignment Sheet

You will be completing a performance journal based upon **field notes** you take at the theatre and during the performance. Here is how to do that:

- You must arrive at least 30 minutes prior to curtain.
- Come equipped with a small notebook or bundle of scrap paper and pen.
- Explore the building, the two-level lobby, the restrooms, the artwork on the walls.
- Observe the theatre patrons as they arrive. What are they like demographically? What is the mood/atmosphere of the theatre? Are people being social or quiet? Does it feel formal, reserved, casual, exuberant, familiar, alien?
- By ten minutes before curtain, take your seat. Continue your field notes in the theatre. What does the space look like? How are people reacting as they enter the theatre? Where are you sitting, and what's your perspective on the performance space from there?
- Look at the set, the lighting, listen for any music. What sort of mood is being established in the theatre?
- Once the performance begins, take notes on what you see, hear, smell, noting anything that strikes you onstage, in the audience, or in your own emotional responses.
- During intermission, listen to the conversations in the bathroom line, at the bar, in the lobby. How are people responding to the show?
- After the show ends, look around the theatre again to see/hear how people respond.
- When you get home or early the next day, pull out your notes and review them. Type them up, fleshing out incomplete thoughts, putting notes from early in the evening in the context of what you learned as the performance progressed. These are your polished observation notes.
- If you haven't had the chance yet, you should carefully examine the program at this stage. You may also want to look at the theatre's website and social media profiles (Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram), examining how the show has been marketed.

For the **performance journal**, submit a 500-word reflection on the experience of seeing *Titus Andronicus* in person. You can comment on any aspects of the evening that were of interest to you. This needn't be analytical; you will also write a critical performance response in which you'll offer a close reading of a particular interpretive choice. This is more general, more varied, and more personal. This also isn't a performance review. Again: this is your individual diary entry about having seen the play.

Appendix B: Critical Performance Response Assignment Sheet

All students will write a 3-4 page critical response to the production we are seeing at the theatre.

The key word here is **critical**. This is not an emotion-driven reflection on the experience of seeing the play staged (you do that in your performance journal), nor is it a review of the quality of the performance; rather, it's a scholarly, intellectual engagement with the production. Consider the performance and design choices that the actors and production team made. Consider lighting, sound, and costume as well as how various actors perform the roles they are assigned. Look at the set, consider what has been cut from the play for performance. How do these actors handle a fairly unfamiliar play from Shakespeare's canon? How do they handle the violence? All that Latin?

Your response need not be thesis-driven in a traditional sense, but it must be more than a series of disconnected observations. Focus is key. It's a long play, and you won't be able to write about everything. Choose **one** scene, a handful of moments, one design element, or a particular character, and focus your critical response on that. You should be commenting on how this production—be it in design or performance—highlights certain themes in the play, engages with either Shakespearean or contemporary ideas/traditions, or challenges or supports your understanding of the text. In short: what did you gain from seeing the play performed?

Other prompts to consider:

- What interpretive choices did the production make that surprised you or altered your understanding of a character?
- What is the dynamic in the theatre like? How does pacing shift?
- What theatrical tricks are used to convey the passage of time?
- Do the actors break the fourth wall and engage with you?

Remember, the text will show itself to be different than you thought when you're sitting in a theatre, hearing it and witnessing it in the hands and mouths of talented actors. Pay attention to that: what is being made new for you? And how, as an audience member at a live performance, are you contributing to that remaking?

Notes

¹ CSC is an SPT 5+, or a small professional theatre, as categorized by the Actors Equity Association.

² I administered an anonymous survey at the end of the course. One of the questions on it was “Was \$20/play too much to expect students to pay to see the show?” Only one of the 16 respondents, or 6.25% of the class enrollment, chose “It was almost prohibitive.” Five of the sixteen respondents checked “It was OK/I made it work” response (31.25%), while 10 students (62.5%) chose “Nope, totally worth it.” A few commented that while worth it, it required budgetary planning, or that it was completely manageable and reasonable *because* they didn’t have to also pay for textbooks.

³ In her essay, Winston discusses a continuum of “ideas of the text’s relationship to performance,” ranging from “prioritize[ing] textual interpretation (at one end) [to] the contingencies of performance (at the other)” (297). I sought to design assignments for each end of this continuum.

⁴ I always strive to teach one each of comedy, romance, history, and tragedy. In a non-performance-based semester, I teach five plays, the fifth of which students get to vote in. For a final exam in all of my Shakespeare classes, students have to read a Shakespeare play independently and write a 3-4 page essay putting it into conversation with what we read collectively in the course.

⁵ In her essay in this issue, Elizabeth Charlebois rightly notes that “film is no substitute for attending a live performance” (11). I fully agree, but I find this a useful conversation to have

with the students. In particular, it's helpful to contrast the different ways their experience is shaped by viewing 1) a cinematic Shakespeare film; 2) a recorded live stage performance; 3) a live performance in-person at a theatre. In both the first and second case, as Charlebois notes, viewer perception is controlled by where the camera focuses. Additionally, as I note later in this essay, the distance between performer and audience offered by a camera and a screen dulls our appreciation for the embodied nature of performance. My students' fascination with the physicality of the CSC actors' performances allowed me to return to this claim after we'd seen the live productions.

⁶See also Rizzio, Rocklin, and the many amazing educator resources put out by major theatres, such as the Globe, the RSC, and the American Shakespeare Center.

⁷Kevin Quarmby's reviewer guidelines are available on *Scene*'s criteria for submissions (see Quarmby in Works Cited).

⁸This use of performance history is a well-established pedagogical tool. See, for example, Howlett.

⁹I owe thanks especially to Elizabeth Zeman Kolkovich for this exercise, which I borrowed from her, adapted, and used with permission.

¹⁰In a future semester, I would want to include a broader introduction, with not only Worthen but also short pieces from texts such as Bial and Brady, Carlson, and Schechner.

¹¹In September 2017, CSC opened their new theatre on a site formerly occupied by the Drop Inn Shelter, a much-loved community homeless shelter. The optics of this—even though the Drop Inn Shelter moved north a few years earlier—are not entirely positive. At the same time, CSC's

new theatre is part of both a classic arts corridor in Cincinnati—it's in the same block now as the famous Cincinnati Music Hall, home of the symphony; not far from the ballet; and near Memorial Hall, a classic concert hall—and part of a continuing revitalization of the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood that has been openly criticized as gentrification or “re-*white*-ification.”

¹² Further prompts included: Were there local references? Indications that the actors were members of the community in which the students also live? Sociability among audience members who could be loosely described as neighbors?

¹³ Ultimately, all of my students attended and almost all thoroughly enjoyed the production. But it was rough, and I often questioned the ethics of what I was doing. I think this is a challenge those more entrenched in the experience of performance-based pedagogy may be richly familiar with already. For me, it was a rude awakening. I was grateful for Sharon James's work for guidance here.

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