

**A Concise Introduction to  
Contemporary Shakespeare**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Introduction
- 'Contemporary Shakespeare' by Robert Shaughnessy, Reader in Drama at the University of Surrey, Roehampton
- Key Productions on Digital Theatre+
- Contemporary Shakespeare in Theory & Practice
- Discussion Questions

## INTRODUCTION

This is a comprehensive introduction to contemporary Shakespeare. This guide:

- Offers a detailed analysis of the classical origins, theories and practices of contemporary Shakespeare in an essay, followed by a list of further reading, written by Robert Shaughnessy, Reader in Drama at the University of Surrey, Roehampton.
- Includes guidance on other useful related resources on Digital Theatre+ such as information on key productions, essays and interviews.
- Provides key materials useful for individual student-led research and in-classroom discussions.

## CONTEMPORARY SHAKESPEARE

**Robert Shaughnessy, Reader in Drama at the University of Surrey,  
Roehampton**

### INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare's plays have become close to a world religion, the common cultural currency of almost every country: performed, adapted, translated and reinvented into every conceivable shape, style and form. Shakespeare is the unique ingredient shared by both the most conservative elements of the theatrical mainstream and the furthest reaches of the avant-garde. To try to understand theatre without knowing our greatest living playwright would be like studying anatomy and ignoring the skeleton, because, after all, it's just bones.

This Concise Introduction takes its cue from Shakespeare in recent and contemporary performance, primarily though not exclusively by addressing those productions documented and shared on this platform. It outlines the ways that this work engages current concerns and priorities, in terms of gender identity and representation, race, diversity and disability; and it explores the increasing interdependence of live, screened, and live-screened performance. This includes productions by mainstream organisations such as the Royal Shakespeare Company and Shakespeare's Globe, intercultural performance by Tara Arts, Shakespeare beyond the Anglosphere, in prisons and in communities. Shakespeare matters because its recent performance history has proved far more diverse and inclusive, and potentially more a force for good, than was previously imaginable.

## HISTORY

### Shakespeare's Globe

By any measure, 2016 was an eventful year: in addition to the United Kingdom referendum vote that ended the nation's 40-year membership of the European Union and the election in November of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States, it was the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death on 23 April 1616. In the UK, though a little overshadowed by these and other momentous world events, the occasion was marked by a wide variety of celebratory activities. The BBC programming included *The Hollow Crown*, a drastically edited, star-packed and hyper-violent adaptation of the Histories, the domestic sitcom *Upstart Crow* and a web page collecting the local Shakespearean stories unearthed by every one of its regional television and radio stations. The British Library mounted the exhibition *Shakespeare in Ten Acts*, tracing his history as a cultural icon, and there was a profusion of screenings, concerts, readings, talks, and, not least, theatrical performances. These ranged from the first all-Black production of *Hamlet* in the UK to avant-garde veterans Forced Entertainment's *Complete Works: Tabletop Shakespeare*, wherein the plays were performed through the puppetry of household objects (with Hamlet played by a bottle of ink). Talawa Theatre marked both the quatercentenary and its own 30th anniversary with a majority-Black production of *King Lear*, and the Royal Shakespeare Company presented *A Midsummer Night's Dream as A Play for the Nation*, recruiting 14 amateur casts across the country as the Mechanicals.

One theatre where the tone of the celebrations was, unexpectedly, rather soured was the Shakespeare's Globe reconstruction. The year saw the final performances of the two-year tour of *Hamlet* that had taken the play to virtually every country in the world, and the end of Dominic Dromgoole's decade-long reign as artistic director; into his shoes

stepped Emma Rice, known for her irreverent, populist (some felt flippant and irresponsible) way with Shakespeare. Rice immediately divided opinion with a *Midsummer Night's Dream* that modernised dialogue, cast against race and gender, lampooned the Globe's traditions and, unforgivably, used stage lighting and amplified sound – setting it on a collision course with the theatre's most cherished and fundamental principles. By the end of the season, Rice announced her resignation, and the Globe reverted to the practices that had been established nearly two decades previously.

For current purposes, the opening of the Globe in 1997 marks one of the boundaries of contemporary Shakespeare (the other being the closure of theatres worldwide in early 2020, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic). That event was both a beginning and a culmination of decades of lobbying, activism and fundraising, as well as the product of a unique, unusual and not altogether harmonious alliance between scholars and theatre professionals. The brainchild of the American actor Sam Wanamaker, the Globe was intended to be as accurate a reconstruction of its lost original as the surviving evidence and contemporary scholarship could determine; hand-crafted, using traditional materials, the open-air building eschewed modern stage technologies in quest of a Shakespearean experience that would be, it was hoped, both more authentic and genuinely popular. The appointment of the actor Mark Rylance as first artistic director in 1996 was a clear signal: Rylance had strong views about the dominance of directors, and the Globe was to be an actor's space; a space, moreover, where there was always a third actor in the scene: the audience.

Shakespeare's Globe officially opened with *Henry V*, led by Rylance and directed by Laurence Olivier's son Richard, but its first performances were those of the 'Prologue Season' during the late summer of the previous year. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* was first: played in contemporary costumes by a diverse cast, it deliberately downplayed

'heritage' expectations and, in a foretaste of what would become the Globe's most notorious feature, surprised many with the boisterous response of the standing audience. In the early years, productions were designated as 'modern' or 'authentic' practices (later modified to the less dogmatic 'original' practices); authenticity, in the case of *Henry V*, meant rushes strewn across the stage, hand-stitched underwear and men playing the women's roles. Lucy Bailey's *As You Like It* followed in 1998, in repertory alongside Olivier's *The Merchant of Venice*, which featured Théâtre de Complicité actors Marcello Magni and Lilo Bauer bringing a *commedia dell'arte* style to the Gobbo double-act; for Complicité co-actor Kathryn Hunter's riotous *The Comedy of Errors* (1999), Magni was unleashed on both Dromio twins. This season saw the first new play at the Globe, Peter Oswald's *Augustine's Oak*, and Rylance again leading an all-male cast as the queen in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Mindful that the authentic practice of assigning the handful of great Shakespearean female roles to men was hardly advancing equal opportunities at the Globe, Vanessa Redgrave was cast as Prospero the following year in *The Tempest*; two years later, Barry Kyle's *Richard III* and *The Taming of the Shrew* (directed by Phyllida Lloyd) were played with all-female casts. Diversity casting has been a feature of the Globe almost from its inception; when Michelle Terry became artistic director in 2018, she reaffirmed her predecessor's commitment to inclusivity with a season cast freely across race, gender and ability: for *Hamlet*, in which Terry took the lead, Ophelia was Shubham Saraf; in *As You Like It*, Rosalind was Jack Laskey, Bettrys Jones was Orlando, and the d/Deaf actor Nadia Nadarajah delivered her part in British Sign Language.

Rylance marked his final season as artistic director in 2005 with a quirky, minimalist three-actor *Tempest*; his successor Dominic Dromgoole debuted in 2006 with a sprawling *Antony and Cleopatra*. Dromgoole was better known as a director of new plays (his only previous Shakespeare was a poorly received *Troilus and Cressida* at the Old Vic in 1999), but he sustained the Globe's populist reputation,

steadily built its output of streamed and recorded performances, promoted new writing (notably Che Walker's *The Frontline* in 2008), opened the second indoor auditorium, the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, in 2014, and diversified the theatre's range. In 2012, as part of the London Cultural Olympiad, the 'Globe to Globe' season consolidated a tradition of visiting productions that began in 1997 with Welcome Msomi's Zulu version of *Macbeth*, *uMabatha*, hosting 37 companies offering productions in styles and languages that traversed the canon from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in Shona to *Henry VIII* in Castilian Spanish.

## **Tara Arts and Talawa**

Alongside productions from Italy, Germany, Russia and Poland that represented the visually focused, director-led Shakespeare familiar to continental European audiences (exemplified by Thomas Ostermeier's productions at the Schaubühne Berlin and the work of Moscow's Satirikon Theatre), the ones that made the most impact were those that appealed primarily to the eye rather than the ear, and that were furthest, culturally and theatrically, from the Western mainstream: Grupo Galpão's circus-style Brazilian Portuguese *Romeo and Juliet* and Auckland's Ngakau Toa company's Maori *Troilus and Cressida*. Here the intercultural aspect of the Globe to Globe Festival, the combination and juxtaposition of the contemporary and the traditional, the global and the local, was at its most insistent. Closer to home, aspects of this cultural mix were already very much present in the work of British Black and Asian theatre artists, most notably in that of Tara Arts. Founded by Jatinder Verma in 1977 as part of the wave of political and cultural activism that followed the racist murder of Gurdip Singh Chaggar in Southall in 1976, Tara Arts embraced a hybrid performance vocabulary that Verma labelled 'Binglish' (literally, British Indian English, but metaphorically much more expansive and inclusive than this suggests). The company's first Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida* (1993), was a

physical theatre piece drawing on Indian classical dance and martial arts, spoken in English, French and Hindi, described by one reviewer as “a powerful argument for multicultural Shakespeare” (Irving Wardle, *The Times*, 3 October 1993). More recently, Verma’s *Macbeth* (2015) cast the witches as bearded hijras (the Indian subcontinent’s legally recognised third gender), and placed the action in the domestic setting of a British Indian household invaded by Bollywood-style eruptions of song, dance and violent spectacle.

Around the same time Tara Arts also established the Arts Council-funded Black Theatre Live, a consortium of regional theatres committed to fostering BAME companies; in 2016, this led to the first British all-Black *Hamlet*, directed by Jeffery Kissoon. In the same year, Talawa Theatre’s *King Lear* was the UK’s first majority-Black production of the play.

Talawa (Jamaican patois for gutsy and strong) was founded in 1986 by Yvonne Brewster, Carmen Munroe, Mona Hammond and Inigo Espejel in response to the lack of opportunities for Black artists in the UK theatre. Though the company has staged relatively few Shakespeares (four productions in its 30-year history), it has been at the forefront of efforts to challenge white dominance of the canon: Brewster’s first *King Lear* in 1994 saw Ben Thomas play Britain’s first Black Lear since Ira Aldridge in 1859; *Othello* (1997) had actors of colour as Cassio, Bianca and Emilia alongside Thomas’s Moor. Equally significant, historically, was *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1991: not only was this the first all-Black production in the UK, it also redefined the traditionally white part of Cleopatra, played here by Doña Croll, as a specifically Black role.

## **The Royal Shakespeare Company**

Even so, it took some time for other theatre organisations to catch up. The RSC’s last Cleopatra of the 20th century, and its first of the 21st, was Frances de la Tour in 1999, and it would take a further 13 years before an actor of colour (Joaquina Kalukango) played the role at Stratford.

Also at the millennium's edge, Greg Doran directed Antony Sher and Alexandra Gilbreath in *The Winter's Tale* on the Royal Shakespeare Theatre main stage and Sher and Harriet Walter in *Macbeth* in the 400-seat Jacobean replica space, the Swan. Doran's *Macbeth* is a film-theatre hybrid that centres in close-up on the performances of Sher and Walter, and in this respect it set the direction that the RSC would take from this point onwards: star-powered and actor-centred (rather than directorial concept-driven) productions that increasingly eyed the potential for media crossover. In 2003, the year Michael Boyd succeeded Adrian Noble, Doran directed an *All's Well That Ends Well* that marketed a risky play on the star casting of Dame Judi Dench in the relatively small role of the Countess of Roussillon. In 2008, he cast *Doctor Who* star David Tennant as Hamlet (with Patrick Stewart as Claudius and Penny Downie as Gertrude).

The 2009 production of *Hamlet* with David Tennant was filmed, as was Boyd's white-box *As You Like It*, from the same year. Since then, RSC performances have routinely travelled from stage to screen. After Doran became artistic director in 2012, the company began regular live-streaming of performances, subsequently commercially released (and hosted on this platform); this body of work provides a rounded account of the company's Shakespearean output during the period, offering a spread of genres and mixing well-known plays with less familiar ones. In 2014, Christopher Luscombe decided to pair his Edwardian-era *Love's Labour's Lost* with a post-First World War *Much Ado about Nothing*, retitling the latter *Love's Labour's Won* on the somewhat spurious grounds that this was the alternative title of Shakespeare's lost play. Greg Doran's fusion of live action and digital projection in *The Tempest* was seen in 2016. Polly Findlay directed Christopher Eccleston and Niamh Cusack in a horror-movie *Macbeth* in 2018 that was notable for its macabre use of young girls as the witches. Beginning with Peter Hall and John Barton's *The Wars of the Roses* in 1963–4, history cycles have long served for the RSC as large-scale opportunities for company self-

definition. Between 2013 and 2015, Doran followed suit, starting with *Richard II*, which saw the return of Tennant in the title role, and ending with *Henry V*; in between, the two parts of *Henry IV* were dominated by Sher's outsized Falstaff. Doran went on to direct Sher as Lear in 2016.

## **Stratford Festival of Canada**

While all this activity was taking place in Stratford, UK, parallel initiatives were introduced in the Stratford on the other side of the Atlantic, in Ontario. In 2015, under the direction of the Stratford Festival of Canada's Antoni Cimolino, the Shakespearean repertory company launched its first season of cinema broadcasts of productions premiered during the previous year: *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *King John*.

Conceived in part as a concerted attempt to disseminate a distinctively Canadian Shakespeare to global as well as North American audiences (rather than British-accented RSC and National Theatre versions that have tended to dominate the theatrical and cultural conversation), Stratford Festival HD, as the name suggests, promises high-definition access to a cultural experience that has previously seemed forbiddingly costly and remote. Cimolino's Jacobean-costumed *King Lear*, led by Colm Feore, was notable for the ferocity of the family drama, a memorably cataclysmic storm scene (reminiscent of Hurricane Katrina) and a watchful, silent chorus of vagrants. Gary Griffin's sparse, period-appropriate *Antony and Cleopatra* had Geraint Wyn Davies and Yanna McIntosh in the title roles. Fresh from his success on Broadway with the Globe's all-male *Twelfth Night*, Tim Carroll was brought in for an original-practices *King John*, which meant transforming the festival's smaller auditorium, the Tom Patterson Theatre, into a candle-lit approximation of the indoor Blackfriars playhouse.

The 2015 season launched with Cimolino's stark, Great War-era *Hamlet*, starring an acclaimed Jonathan Goad; it was followed by Chris Abraham's metatheatrical *The Taming of the Shrew* in which Sly (Ben

Carlson, played as an unruly audience member wielding a disruptive cell phone) doubled as Petruchio, opposite Deborah Hay's forceful Katharina. Hay was also at the centre of Scott Wentworth's Victorian-set *Pericles*, in which she played the hero's three women: Antiochus's daughter, Marina and Thaisa. The following year, Cimolino's dark, phantasmagorical, 11th-century Scottish *Macbeth* cast the unusually young Ian Lake and Krystin Pellerin as the leads, offering a brutally unromantic reading of the play. Finally, in 2017, Scott Wentworth's fast-paced, cinematically fluent *Romeo and Juliet* offered a women-centred perspective on the story with a chorus of black-clad widows and ugly flashes of misogynist violence; a period-set piece where Stephen Ouimette's brashly modern-dress *Timon of Athens* – its first production at Stratford in 13 years – was resolutely contemporary. Apart from casting a few of Timon's creditors as women, the production did not attempt to redress the notorious gender imbalance of a play with no significant female roles; rather than representing a lapse in the festival's commitment to diversity casting, this was perhaps the point: here was a world (the audience's world, our world) of club beats, bad debts and toxic, white, monied masculinity.

## **Diversifying Shakespeare**

As well as driving the RSC's efforts to extend its reach through its media initiatives, Greg Doran has also led attempts to make the company and its audiences address its and the canon's traditional lack of diversity. His 2012 *Julius Caesar* with an all-Black cast was set in a fictitious African state, a device that was repeated four years later in Godwin's *Hamlet*. In 2015, Lucian Msamati was the first Black RSC actor to play Iago, opposite Hugh Quarshie's Othello in Iqbal Khan's production. By 2017, it was no longer news when Josette Simon, who back in 1984 had been the first female Black actor in a lead role at the RSC (Rosaline in Barry Kyle's *Love's Labour's Lost*), was Khan's Cleopatra; also in this season, Sope Dirisu made history as the first Black Coriolanus. As had happened

at the Globe a decade earlier, strategic cross-gendered casting became increasingly the norm: in 2018, Erica Whyman's *Romeo and Juliet* cast women in five male roles (including Charlotte Josephine as Mercutio), and in 2016 Melly Still's *Cymbeline* cast Gillian Bevan in the title role.

The 2019 season took this a step further with a programme of four Shakespeare plays (*As You Like It*, *King John*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Measure for Measure*) scrupulously cross-cast to create the RSC's most gender-balanced company ever, with 24 male and 21 female actors. The cross-casting generated queer resonances: in *As You Like It*, Silvius became Silvia, in a same-sex relationship with Phebe; in *Measure for Measure*, Mistress Overdone was styled as a drag queen. The most fully realised reversal was the gender-flipped *Shrew*, in which all of the female characters became male, and (almost) vice versa; in this version, Padua was a counterfactual Renaissance matriarchy in which the taming of Kate (Joseph Arkley) by Petruchia (Claire Price) could be seen with fresh eyes.

In 2012, Phyllida Lloyd, the *Shrew*'s director, began a trilogy of all-female productions at the Donmar with *Julius Caesar*; this was followed by a redacted *Henry IV* in 2014 (the year that Maxine Peake played Hamlet at the Royal Exchange, Manchester), and completed by *The Tempest* in 2016. The plays were framed as performances by inmates in a women's prison, a device that generated multiple layers of performative role play, with actors occupying the personae both of their prisoner characters and of their male Shakespearean alter egos, and where the vicious power dynamics of one fictional world bled into the other. At the head of a strong ensemble was Harriet Walter, who played Brutus, Henry and Prospero, and who has written of how the trilogy liberated women confined to playing "daughters, mothers, wives or widows of the Main Man" to take on characters "whose main concerns were freedom, power, morality and mortality" (2016, pp. 203–5).

The Donmar Trilogy was developed in collaboration with Clean Break, a theatre company that has devoted four decades to working with women with experience of the criminal justice system, and the world it created incorporated elements of a legacy of real-life histories of incarceration and positive change. As such, it touched upon the final aspect of contemporary Shakespeare to concern us here: its growing involvement in the broad and diverse field of activities collectively known as applied and socially engaged theatre. This term covers a spectrum of practices that includes work in settings ranging from prisons to care homes; that addresses issues of (amongst others) physical and mental health, social exclusion, the environmental crisis, disability and diversity; and that targets the needs of specific, often under-represented, groups and communities, whether these be the young, the old, the disabled or the dispossessed. Applied Shakespeare is found in the prison-based Shakespeare Behind Bars project founded by Curt Toftland in the United States, in UK-based Flute Theatre's work with autistic individuals, and in the National Theatre's 2018 *Pericles*, created in association with Queen's Theatre Hornchurch as part of its Public Acts initiative, which brought artists together with multi-ethnic community participants to create an epic celebration of diversity, multiculturalism and the migrant experience. If there is a common thread to all of the disparate forms and activities considered in these pages, it is that Shakespeare can and must still be considered our contemporary; not the least of the challenges, and opportunities, of this work is that it invites us to ask ourselves who 'we' might be.

## THEORY

If the opening of Shakespeare's Globe in 1997 appeared to represent the successful, material outcome of a century of efforts to bring theatre and scholarship into alignment, it did not take long for practice to overtake the theory, or rather theories, that underpinned it. From its inception, the Globe project had been driven by multiple (and potentially

contradictory) agendas. On the one hand, there was the painstaking work, simultaneously meticulously detailed and boldly speculative, of historical recovery and reconstruction, the piecing together of the scattered, fragmentary and partial traces of the original playhouses: pictorial records in the form of maps, views and Tudor iconography; textual clues in stage directions, internal references and descriptive accounts; the archaeological evidence provided by the foundations of the recently rediscovered Rose playhouse, unearthed in 1987; traditional building techniques and surviving architecture from the period. Between them, these provided the materials to construct a laboratory, as the scholars saw it, in which Shakespeare's historically authentic self would be brought back to life. On the other hand, there were those, not least Sam Wanamaker himself, who saw the Globe as a recovery of the spirit of a genuinely democratic and inclusive theatre, co-owned by its actors and audiences, its priority being to create a Shakespeare that was popular, immediate and accessible rather than pedantically 'authentic'.

Even before it opened, there were those who denounced the Globe as a reactionary fantasy of a Merrie England Golden Age that never was, and in some quarters this suspicion persisted. Almost from the beginning, however, the most interesting lessons to be learned from the Globe were the most unexpected: what was discovered within its walls, beneath the open skies, was not the historical essence of Shakespeare but radically new (though in some respects very old) ways of thinking about the relationship between actor and audience, and about the experiences of spectating, of being an audience. The shift is marked by two collections of scholarly essays, the first published on the occasion of its opening, the second a decade later. In *Shakespeare's Globe Rebuilt* (1997), the editors define the Globe as an "opportunity" to truly understand Shakespeare "as authentically as scholarship and craftsmanship can contrive" (Mulryne and Shewring, p. 24); but for the author of the afterword of *Shakespeare's Globe: A Theatrical Experiment* (2008) the Globe's significance "has little to do with the experiences of those

attending plays in a not dissimilar theatre just round the corner between 1599 and 1613” (Carson and Karim-Cooper, p. 231). This seeming anomaly, the disparity between what the Globe was set up to be and what it has become, is not weakness but strength. A critical generation later, Shakespeare’s Globe is a constant point of reference in *The Arden Research Handbook of Shakespeare and Contemporary Performance* (Kirwan and Prince, 2021), but in ways that Wanamaker and company could never have anticipated: the introduction opens with an account of the all-female, all-Black *Richard II* in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse in 2016, an event that intersectionally marked all manner of theatre-historical firsts while powerfully reflecting on ideas of sovereignty, nationhood and race in a country where these had become fiercely contested as never before.

The collection’s emphases are also indicative of how far the axis of contemporary critical commentary has shifted away from the formerly canonical output of the Royal Shakespeare Company. This in part reflects the diverse and plural nature of Shakespeare performance since the millennium, a field no longer defined by the productions of ‘world-leading’ companies, dominated by a handful of star classical actors, and within the Anglosphere, and no longer confined to the theatre stage but extending across and between screen media, no longer destined to disappear from view as soon as the production closes but routinely preserved in perpetuity on video and film, the object of repeated viewing and growing critical discussion (as this platform and others comprehensively demonstrate). Within the UK, the once-dominant RSC has shared cultural space not just with the Globe but also the Tobacco Factory in Bristol, and the touring companies Northern Broadsides and Propeller. Beyond its shores, Shakespearean performance scholarship today is as likely to discuss Ivo van Hove’s *Roman Tragedies* in Amsterdam, Sulayman Al-Bassam’s Arabic *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, or, courtesy of the Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive, scores of productions in Chinese, Japanese and Korean. The boundaries of what

constitutes Shakespeare have become looser, more extensive and more porous: many intercultural and international performances blur the distinction between translation and adaptation as a matter of routine, while two of the longest-running Shakespearean productions in New York, the Wooster Group's multi-media *Hamlet* and Punchdrunk's immersive installation re-imagining of *Macbeth*, *Sleep No More*, have also attracted a great deal of attention.

Introducing the wide-ranging collection *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Performance* (2017), which in 36 essays across more than 600 pages addresses many of these and much more, James C. Bulman notes that the performance criticism of the 20th century “measured the value of a performance by its representation of and fidelity to a presumably fixed and authoritative Shakespearean text” (p. 2). Naturally, it gravitated towards the RSC, not only as the custodian of this traditional authority (albeit spiced with ‘relevance’), but as the home of productions that, by advancing tightly conceptual directorial ‘readings’ of the plays, lent themselves in turn to performance-critical readings. The fixity and authority of Shakespeare and his texts have long since passed into memory; along with, to a certain extent, the authority of the director. Drawing upon the realisation from Performance Studies that contemporary Shakespeare is a multi-modal and multi-dimensional enterprise, reviewing and critical writing attends less to intentions than to means and effects, and often less to texts than to real-world contexts. Crucially, these involve considerations of class, of gender and sexuality, and of race: as Ayanna Thompson, writing as an American scholar of colour puts it, when hearing and seeing Shakespeare, “I see race: whiteness, blackness, Hispanic-ness, Asian-ness, the normatively raced, and the deviantly raced. It is always there; it is always present; it always impacts the way Shakespeare is being employed” (2011, p. 3).

The work undertaken by Thompson and others to end the discipline's silence around questions about race, led to her game-changing *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race* in 2021. One crucial issue is not just what is to be said about Shakespeare and race but who gets to say it, and the volume was the first in the long-running *Companions* series to include a chapter written by an actor, Adrian Lester. Tracking his work on Othello in the 2013 National Theatre production, Lester responds to Hugh Quarshie's earlier contention that "perhaps" the role "should definitely not be played by a black actor", as it risks "making racial stereotypes legitimate and true". Quarshie subsequently changed his mind and played the role for the RSC in 2015; for Lester, the unease generated by the play stemmed from it showing "a truth about our attitudes to race, gender and violence that even after four hundred years we still have trouble dealing with" (p. 225).

The acknowledgement of the actor's perspective, while it has particular political resonances in this instance, applies a principle to which performance scholarship has paid lip service; that their lived experience and know-how affords them a unique authority and insight into how Shakespeare works. This has generated a thriving subgenre of Shakespearean practitioner commentary, which includes how-to manuals aimed at training actors grappling with the challenges of verse (from Cicely Berry's course staple, *The Actor and the Text*, 2000, to Mark Rylance and Giles Block's *Speaking the Speech*, 2013), insider accounts of the development of an individual role (the *Cambridge Players of Shakespeare* series, 1988–2007), and the diary-memoir in which, typically, the actor's journey through a role becomes personal as well as professional (Adrian Lester and Lolita Chakrabarti's *A Working Diary*, 2020; Antony Sher's trio of books documenting his Richard III, Falstaff and Lear). Leading directors have also shared their reflections, from Peter Brook (*The Empty Space*, published in 1968, is still essential reading for anyone interested in Shakespeare in modern theatre), via Peter Hall (*Shakespeare's Advice to the Players*, 2003), Adrian Noble

(*How to do Shakespeare*, 2009) and John Barton (the much-criticised but still-used guide *Playing Shakespeare*) to Dominic Dromgoole, whose breezy *Will and Me* (2006) marked his arrival at Shakespeare's Globe with the story of how he “stumbled, shambled and occasionally glided through a life with Shakespeare as a guide” (p. x).

Shakespeare scholars, fancying themselves as the authors' gatekeepers, have generally been wary of actors' chronicles, usually because they tend to adhere to the values and practices that much modern theory has called into question: psychological complexity, Shakespeare's timelessness, the authority of the text. For all the talk of dialogue, scholars have had a habit of listening to actors in order to then tell them why they are wrong. But perhaps the gap between the languages of the stage and academy is not just a matter of competing or incompatible understandings of what Shakespeare is, and what it is for, but an asymmetry of form, content and medium. Maybe it is no more reasonable to expect an actor to articulate a role in a format that scholars recognise as valid than it would be for me to convey my theory of *Hamlet* by trying out the lead in the play. It would take a rare critic to reach Harriet Walter's perception, born from playing the roles night after night after night, that “if he had been writing for women, Shakespeare would have tailored the roles to fit the accepted limits of female decorum and would have produced a much narrower range of characters for us to tackle; so again I am thankful” (2016, p. 25). At the same time, there is the story of Laurence Olivier, having triumphed as Othello, in tears in his dressing room because he knew he would never understand (let alone explain) why.

Maybe, also, the more natural medium to talk about acting is the spoken rather than the written word, and in the era of the podcast, video interview, roundtable and open workshop this is becoming increasingly prevalent. Whether it is Ben Crystal discussing his approach to language, Ray Fearon remembering his Othello, Zoe Waites on Viola,

Michael Gould and actors testing the possibilities of texts, or Michael Dobson in conversation with Kelly Hunter, actors are embracing the opportunities of formats that are flexible, dialogic, playful and open to the spontaneous, the exploratory and the improvised: the space of the rehearsal room rather than the lecture theatre. To really get to contemporary Shakespeare, read the scholars, and hear the actors.

## REFERENCES

Aebischer, P., S. Greenhalgh and L. Osborne (eds) (2019). *Shakespeare and the 'Live' Theatre Broadcast Experience*. London: The Arden Shakespeare.

Bulman, J. (ed.) (2017). *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Performance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Carson, C. and F. Karim-Cooper (eds) (2008). *Shakespeare's Globe: A Theatrical Experiment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cook, A. (2020). *Shakespearean Futures: Casting the Bodies of Tomorrow on Shakespeare's Stages Today*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dromgoole, D. (2007). *Will & Me: How Shakespeare Took Over My Life*. London: Penguin.

Hodgdon, B. (2021). *Ghostly Fragments: Essays on Shakespeare and Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Kirwan, P. and K. Prince (eds) (2021). *The Arden Research Handbook of Shakespeare and Contemporary Performance*. London: The Arden Shakespeare.

Mulryne, J. R. and M. Shewring (eds) (1997). *Shakespeare's Globe Rebuilt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Palfrey, S. (2011). *Doing Shakespeare*. London: The Arden Shakespeare.

Smith, E. (2019). *This is Shakespeare*. Harmondsworth: Pelican Books.

Thompson, A. (2011). *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race and Contemporary America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thompson, A. (ed.) (2021). *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Walter, H. (2016). *Brutus and other Heroines: Playing Shakespeare's Roles for Women*. London: Nick Hern.

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

## KEY PRODUCTIONS ON DIGITAL THEATRE+

This section provides links to some key productions of contemporary Shakespeare. These are followed by a list of other materials on Digital Theatre+ which will be useful for considering the practice in a wider critical context. Quotations from the essay are included to facilitate connections between the content and the critical writing.

From the essay:

*“the Globe was intended to be as accurate a reconstruction of its lost original as the surviving evidence and contemporary scholarship could determine; hand-crafted, using traditional materials, the open-air building eschewed modern stage technologies in quest of a Shakespearean experience that would be, it was hoped, both more authentic and genuinely popular...the Globe was to be an actor’s space; a space, moreover, where there was always a third actor in the scene: the audience.” (Shaughnessy, p.6)*

### [As You Like It](#)



- Written by: William Shakespeare
- Directed by: Thea Sharrock
- Produced by: Shakespeare’s Globe

- Theatre: Shakespeare's Globe
- 2009 production
- Run time: 02:26:58

From the essay:

*“As well as driving the RSC's efforts to extend its reach through its media initiatives, Greg Doran has also led attempts to make the company and its audiences address its and the canon's traditional lack of diversity. His 2012 'Julius Caesar' with an all-Black cast was set in a fictitious African state, a device that was repeated four years later in Godwin's 'Hamlet'.”* (Shaughnessy, p.13)

## Hamlet

- Written by: William Shakespeare
- Directed by: Robin Lough
- Produced by: Royal Shakespeare Company
- Theatre: Royal Shakespeare Theatre
- 2014 production
- Run time: 03:00:32

From the essay:

*“productions from Italy, Germany, Russia and Poland that represented the visually focused, director-led Shakespeare familiar to continental European audiences (exemplified by Thomas Ostermeier's productions at the Schaubühne Berlin and the work of Moscow's Satirikon Theatre)”* (Shaughnessy, p.8)

## King Lear



- Written by: William Shakespeare
- Directed by: Yury Butusov
- Produced by: Stage Russia
- Theatre: Satirikon Theatre
- 2007 production
- Run time: 02:32:19

## CONTEMPORARY SHAKESPEARE IN THEORY & PRACTICE

Below is a list of key interviews, lectures and written articles available on Digital Theatre+ which explore the practice of contemporary Shakespeare. Quotations from the essay are included to facilitate connections between the content and the critical writing.

From the essay:

*“the opening of the Globe in 1997 marks one of the boundaries of contemporary Shakespeare – the other being the closure of theatres worldwide in early 2020, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. That event was both a beginning and a culmination of decades of lobbying, activism and fundraising, as well as the product of a unique, unusual and not altogether harmonious alliance between scholars and theatre professionals.”*

(Shaughnessy, p.6)

### **Shakespeare’s Globe**



### **Unavailable in US**

- Run time: 00:49:34

A documentary account of Shakespeare's Globe that includes interviews with key personnel and practitioners, offering a behind-the-scenes account of the 2005 season.

From the essay:

*“Founded by Jatinder Verma in 1977 as part of the wave of political and cultural activism that followed the racist murder of Gurdip Singh Chaggar in Southall in 1976, Tara Arts embraced a hybrid performance vocabulary that Verma labelled ‘Binglish’ (literally, British Indian English, but metaphorically much more expansive and inclusive than this suggests). The company’s first Shakespeare, ‘Troilus and Cressida’ (1993), was a physical theatre piece drawing on Indian classical dance and martial arts, spoken in English, French and Hindi.” (Shaughnessy, p.9)*

## Contemporary Performance Practice – Tara Arts: Jatinder Verma interviewed by Dominic Hingorani



- Run time: 00:56:19

Artistic Director of Tara Arts, Jatinder Verma, gives personal insight into the company's history and speaks movingly about the rebuilding of Tara Theatre, revealing why he chose to reuse the original bricks and how the space is simultaneously intimate and epic.

From the essay:

*“In 2012, Phyllida Lloyd, the Shrew’s director, began a trilogy of all-female productions at the Donmar with Julius Caesar; this was followed by a redacted Henry IV in 2014 (the year that Maxine Peake played Hamlet at the Royal Exchange, Manchester), and completed by The Tempest in 2016. The plays were framed as performances by inmates in a women’s prison, a device that generated multiple layers of performative role play, with actors occupying the personae both of their prisoner characters and of their male Shakespearean alter egos, and where the vicious power dynamics of one fictional world bled into the other.” (Shaughnessy, p.14)*

## **The Tempest: An Introduction**

- Run time: 00:02:58

Harriet Walter and Phyllida Lloyd discuss why they chose The Tempest as the third instalment of the Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy.

From the essay:

*“Whether it is Ben Crystal discussing his approach to language, Ray Fearon remembering his Othello, Zoe Waites on Viola, Michael Gould and actors testing the possibilities of texts, or Michael Dobson in conversation with Kelly Hunter, actors are embracing the opportunities of formats that are flexible, dialogic, playful and open to the spontaneous, the exploratory and the improvised: the space of the rehearsal room rather than the lecture theatre.” (Shaughnessy, p.21)*

## What's Iambic Pentameter? Explore Shakespeare with Ben Crystal



- Run time: 00:04:52

In this episode, Ben discusses the rhythm at the heart of Shakespeare's writing, unpacking why and how it is used to communicate meaning.

## Playing Shakespeare... On Othello: An Interview with Ray Fearon



- Run time: 00:59:31

Actor Ray Fearon brings the character of Othello to life by combining readings from Shakespeare's text with intimate insights into his own experience of playing the Moor. He considers how Othello swings like a pendulum between love and hatred, and how the opposing use of verse and prose consolidates this effect.

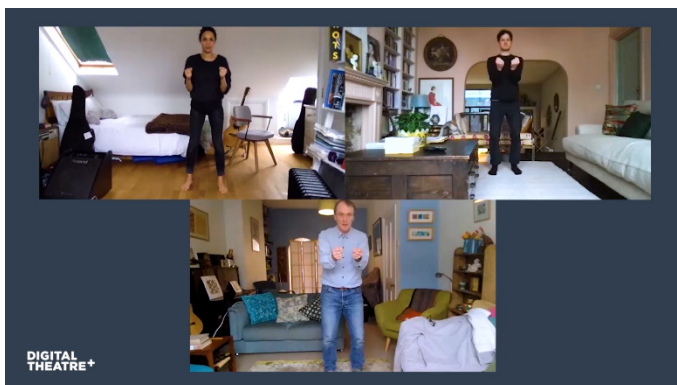
## Playing Shakespeare... On Viola: An Interview with Zoe Waites



- Run time: 00:57:18

In forensic detail, and by unpacking the layers of disguise embedded within the play, actor Zoe Waites analyses the language and rhythms of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and considers how these tools help bring the character of Viola to life.

## Shakespeare in Rehearsal: Chapter 1 – Form, Intuition and the Shakespeare Haka



- Run time: 20m 28s

Vinette and Kyle are led in an iambic physical warm-up and experience the fundamental components of Shakespeare's verse.

## Contemporary Performance Practice – Shakespeare for Inclusive Audiences: Kelly Hunter Interviewed by Michael Dobson



- Run time: 42m 3s

Kelly Hunter was for many years a renowned actor with the Royal Shakespeare Company and is now Artistic Director of Flute Theatre. Hunter, author of Shakespeare's Heartbeat and Cracking Shakespeare talks here with Michael Dobson, Director of the Shakespeare Institute, about her work developing games for children on the autism spectrum using Shakespeare's texts.

## **FURTHER CONCISE INTRODUCTIONS**

Below are links to other concise introductions on the platform which relate to key concepts and practitioners mentioned in this guide. They provide more in-depth biographical and critical information, as well as links to key productions and further resources available on Digital Theatre+ where possible.

### **A Concise Introduction to Peter Brook**

Written by Robert Leach, this guide introduces Peter Brook who has been a towering figure in world theatre in the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. He was born in 1925, the son

of Jewish emigrées from Latvia and, as he found out later, cousin of the Russian theatre director, Valentin Pluchek. He went to Westminster School and Oxford University where he directed an admired production of Marlowe's Doctor Faustus.

## **A Concise Introduction to Michel Saint-Denis**

Professor of Drama at Kingston University, Colin Chambers, provides an overview of the life of Michel Saint-Denis, whose work and ideas on acting have influenced theatre practitioners around the world. Chambers details Saint-Denis' involvement in establishing major theatre companies and studios, including the RSC studio in 1961, and outlines his aim to place the actor at the centre of the theatre.

## **A Concise Introduction to Russian Theatre**

Robert Leach, Former Reader in Drama and Theatre at the University of Birmingham, provides an overview of Russian theatre. Covering history, theory and practice, Leach explores the various methods by some of Russia's leading theatrical practitioners, such as Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vsevolod Meyerhold, and examines the development of realism and anti-realism theatre during the 20th century.

## **A Concise Introduction to Applied Theatre**

Chair of Applied and Social Theatre at Griffith University, Michael Balfour, outlines the history, theory and practice of Applied Theatre. Balfour focuses on Applied Theatre's philosophy of creating theatre and performance concerned with audience engagement and examines a variety of social contexts in which it currently operates.

## **A Concise Introduction to Intercultural Theatre**

Associate Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Melbourne Paul Rae provides an overview of intercultural theatre – a theatre which involves participants coming together from all over the world to share cultural forms, practices and worldviews. Rae details the history, theory and practice of intercultural theatre and refers to the work of key practitioners who have been influential in its development.

## A Concise Introduction to Audience

Associate Professor of Theatre and Dance at Texas Tech University, Dorothy Chansky, provides an introduction to the role of the audience in relation to theatre and performance. Chansky examines how the perception of audience has changed throughout history and considers the way different forms of theatre offer further exploration into the audience as a performing phenomenon.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) For generations, Shakespearean actors and directors have sought to make the plays contemporary, whether in period settings or modern dress. Does a production need to be 'relevant' to speak to audiences today?
- 2) To what extent are contemporary Shakespeare productions in dialogue not only with the playwright but with previous stagings of the play?
- 3) Whereas the director's vision was once seen as the key to a production's meaning, casting (non-traditional, against type, across race and gender) has now become the central consideration. Do you agree?