Here and Now, Now and Then

In 2016, theaters, museums, professional academic organizations, and other cultural institutions around the world commemorated the 400th anniversary of the death of Shakespeare by marking, in various ways, his incredible longevity, his continuing relevance, and his continued domination of the theatrical and literary scenes. There is scarcely a stage on the planet that has not, at some point, played host to one of his plays in some manner, shape, or form (touring production, translation, adaptation, parody, etc.). Shakespeare remains one of the lone "sole author" subjects routinely taught in literature courses at all academic levels in the English-speaking world and offered as an example of English literary works in non–English-speaking contexts. Shakespeare is a cultural calling card. More so than English itself, catchphrases from his plays and references to his characters serve as a lingua franca. One need not speak English to think (in whatever language one speaks) of Yorick when seeing a hand clutching a skull. The original meme, Shakespeare is pervasive, ubiquitous – and yet, somehow, still feared and dreaded by those who fear and dread, as some of his original readers appear to have done, that they will not understand him. I cheekily refer to some of the more miserable-looking audience members who turn up for preshow lectures that I deliver at Chicago Shakespeare Theater for a few shows each season as people who are there to take their Shakespeare vitamins.

The fact of this anxiety and the active work that educators and theater practitioners have done to pave the way to Shakespeare ever since Heminge and Condell admonished readers to "Reade him, therefore; and againe, and againe: And if then you doe not like him, surely you are in some manifest danger, not to understand him" (Heminge and Condell A25) make it all the more intriguing to me that at least two prominent theater companies dedicated primarily to Shakespeare's works chose to mark the quadricentennial of his death by subjecting their casts and their audiences alike to a march through a marathon of history plays. Even more extraordinary, neither of these theaters was located in the UK, where the audience might be expected to have a working familiarity with British history, but in former colonies, where British history is of general relevance largely as it relates to their declaration of independence from their colonizer-founders as related in their own history.

Chicago Shakespeare Theater and the Stratford Festival of Canada both undertook this ambitious enterprise, using Shakespeare's own history plays to mark his claim to four centuries (and counting) of theater history with *Tug of War* and *Breath of Kings*.[1] Both productions were presented in two parts, and each had subtitles intended to synopsize the plays that they covered. *Tug of War: Foreign Fire* included *Edward III*, *Henry V*, and *Henry VI*, Part 1. Staged several months later, *Tug of War: Civil Strife* covered *Henry VI*, Parts 2 and 3 and *Richard III*. In Canada, *Breath of Kings: Rebellion* included *Richard II* and *Henry IV*, Part 1. Using the same cast to reprise their roles, *Breath of Kings: Redemption* concluded Shakespeare's second tetralogy with *Henry IV*, Part 2 and *Henry V*.

In looking back at Shakespeare's work, both artistic directors and adaptors (Barbara Gaines and Graham Abbey, respectively) also looked back to their own prior experiences with some of the work that they presented in these history marathons. Significantly, too, both sets of productions used double- (and greater) casting and modern costume pieces not only to draw connections between the characters and among the plays presented, but also to offer some rather unpleasant – and, in some cases, disturbingly prescient – reflections of the world in which they were presented. Ultimately, both honored Shakespeare's legacy by making Shakespeare "relatable," but in the context of a significant commitment of audience members' time and energy. These Shakespeare vitamins were as taxing as they were invigorating; as hard to swallow as they were rendered palatable.

I am interested in the matroschka of Shakespearean history plays that look backward while also reflecting and refracting contemporary events in early modern London, staged at twenty-first-century theaters, which, in turn, are using them to look back over Shakespeare's oeuvre and its theatrical history while also reflecting and refracting contemporary events in North America. One could have accomplished this objective with a single history play, however, or even a pair or group of them within the anniversary season. Of further interest is the insistence on a Shakespeare

[1] Susan Bennett notes the manner in which "tradition embraces the canon. And at the heart of the literary canon is always Shakespeare" (Bennett 12).

multivitamin: a megadose of what's good for you, or what you would think would be good for you if you had read it well enough to understand it.[2] Given what we know about the history of the composition and early performance of Shakespeare's history plays, these marathon productions deviated from what would have been the Shakespearean norm: contemporary records in no way indicate that Shakespeare's audiences consumed his history plays in this way. As Stuart Sherman put it in the program for *Tug of War: Foreign Fire*, Shakespeare's initial audiences would have had to wait at least a year between productions of his histories when they were new, and "Elizabethan theater never staged three plays in a day; it possessed neither the traditions nor the technology to foster an audience accustomed to binge-watching" (Sherman 10).[3] Indeed, if decades of editorial history are right, Shakespeare's audiences could not have consumed the plays in this way even had they had the appetite for it, since the order of composition for what are now known as the *Henry VI* plays would have rendered such staging initially impossible.[4] Thus, Chicago Shakespeare Theater and the Stratford Festival of Canada chose to commemorate Shakespeare's historical significance with a presentation of his history plays that was ahistorical.

[2] Even a positive review of *Breath of Kings*, for example, began by noting, "A two-part adaptation of the four-play Henriad cycle, this is the kind of nitty-gritty Shakespeare that Stratford often stages at the Tom Patterson Theatre, banking on committed Shakespearean nerds to fill the roughly 500 seats" (Dewan).

[3] Of further interest here are the bragging rights that this program note conferred on the theater and its audiences, both of whom are essentially being congratulated for out-Shakespeare-ing Shakespeare and his original audiences.

[4] The play known today as *Henry VI*, Part 2 could have been written as early as 1591 and was certainly written by 1594 when it appeared in quarto. The next play written was likely *Henry VI*, Part 3, to which reference is made as early as 1592 (in *Greene's Groats-worth of Wit*) and which appeared in print in 1595. The play that we now take to be the start of the sequence of histories about Henry VI was likely also written in 1592, though its first known publication was in the First Folio of 1623. *Edward III* – first printed in 1596 – likely dates from slightly earlier in the 1590s and thus precedes *Henry V* (1599), which it resembles. See Jean E. Howard's introductions to these plays (Greenblatt et al. 181–189; 265–272; 415–423; and 649–655).

Rebecca Schneider begins her pocket guide to *Theatre & History* with an analysis of the world of unease bridged by that tiny conjunction, abbreviated to an ampersand by the imperatives of the series for which she is writing. "For most practitioners," Schneider notes, "the theatre is 'live,' and by definition 'now.' History appears at first glance to be neither" (Schneider, *Theater* 3). "Conversely," she continues, "for historians, studying a medium in its liveness, its 'nowness,' may seem against the grain of the project of history – a project that, by most accounts, seeks to analyze the 'then' in some distinction to the 'now'" (Schneider, *Theater* 3). Performance studies exist precisely in this copulative lacuna in which nowness collides with thenness, particularly when performance is of or about history. "Then and now," Schneider writes, "are not usually given to be simultaneous, except in decidedly problematic embodied practices – like reenactment and theatre" (Schneider, *Theater* 3). The transhistorical, international referentiality of *Tug of War* and *Breath of Kings* echoed and updated the transhistorical referentiality of Shakespeare's two tetralogies in their original sixteenth-century contexts when they hearkened back to medieval events with, at times, uncomfortable contemporary relevance.[5] We bought a ticket.

[5] In a similar vein, the historian Peter Lake has written a lengthy and nuanced account of the interplay between Elizabethan politics and Shakespearean drama in which he argues that Shakespeare's

> contemporaries regularly used recent history to think (and talk) about the here and now, and . . . the plays that dealt with those historical events seemed to speak directly to current circumstances and concerns, and did so in ways that invited contemporary audiences to use the events being acted out on stage to think through some of the most controversial, and in the case of the succession, most taboo, questions of the age.

What Lake says about *Julius Caesar* is equally apt for the plays under discussion here; he argues that the text of the play:

> like any text, is not a *repetition* of its context, but a *re-presentation* of it; it does not simply reiterate what it already knows but reforms it, thereby actually helping to constitute the very context of which it is a part. It is not a mirror but a shaping presence. What is

We signed up. But, except in the case of an emergency, we are supposed to keep the aisles clear at all times and remain in our seats for the duration of the performance. We are supposed to turn off our cell phones. We are supposed to fully commit to the here and now, which is about the then and now and, if we don't pay attention, might also be about tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

1 Marathon Theater

The first marathon is, of course, popularly associated with the Battle of Marathon, in which the Greeks defeated the theretofore largely invincible Persians, and the accompanying legend of a mythic run from the battlefield to Sparta to request reinforcements. The myth of this battlefield run subsequently became bound up in the late nineteenth-century founding of the Olympic Games and the desire to have a "hook" event to link them to Greece. The popularity of this signature marathon run produced a proliferation of marathons in cities around the world. Paradoxically, in 2013 one such marathon – in Boston – became a war zone of sorts when the Tsarnaev brothers planted two bombs near the finish line for the race. The lines between friendly competition and fierce combat are easily blurred; Shakespeare's histories often begin with semifriendly rivalries that erupt into vicious violence with far-reaching consequences.

I have been referring to *Tug of War* (Chicago Shakespeare Theater) and *Breath of Kings* (Stratford Festival, Canada) as "marathons" of

> more, as a shaping presence, as a re-presentation, the play must be recognised as having an active, rather than a passive, merely reflective, relation to what it represents as well as to the audience viewing the representation: that is the play offers a particular perspective on its context, seeking both to define the shape of what it represents and to shape its audience's response to that representation. (Lake 12–13, emph. orig.)

In this Element, I strive to capture both the shape of what *Breath of Kings* and *Tug of War* represented, and at least some audience members' responses to those representations.

Shakespearean history plays, but neither theater referred to the productions in this way. Reviewers, however, did.[6] Linking Chicago Shakespeare Theater's production to "a nationwide appetite for marathon theater," the *Chicago Tribune* promised "Marathon Bard" in their story covering the theater's announcement of the 2015–16 season (Oleksinski). Jonathan Kalb helpfully unpacks the term "marathon" as a descriptor for theater:

> 'marathon' suggests a crass spectacle of masochism and hucksterism, possibly a stunt, but also a monument of genuine and respectable achievement and a feat of endurance. Today, it has evolved into a term of praise and enlargement that is useful precisely because it is mildly tongue-in-cheek and falls just short of hype. 'Marathon' signals something the listener knows is deceptively packaged but nevertheless suspects is impressively excessive, and hence real, underneath. (Kalb 19)

The *Chicago Tribune* seems to have decided that they needed to double down on the hype, connecting Chicago Shakespeare Theater's challenging pair of six-hour productions of the histories to a "nationwide" appeal for such experiences. The *Tribune*'s framing of the production constituted a sort of media peer pressure on their readers to see it.

It is not insignificant that the term "marathon" originates in the history of a battlefield, nor that the two sets of productions that I label here – and have labeled in the writing that I have done about them to date – as "marathons" are themselves largely concerned with battles. These productions were a struggle to produce on the part of the companies who put them on, and at the very least a challenge (if not an actual struggle) for the theatergoers who attended them. In purchasing a ticket, a theatergoer was committing to three to seven hours at a stretch of Shakespearean drama about war. In auditioning to be in a cast that involved double- and even multi-casting across all of the parts of each production, actors were committing to a grueling rehearsal and performance schedule. "Masochism"

[6] See, for example, Adler and Nestruck.

might be a strong term for either endeavor, but a certain fortitude and clear-eyed assessment of what lay ahead were certainly necessary.[7]

Given the focus in these plays on what Christy Desmet calls "wartime politics" (Desmet 8), the resurgence of interest in them in the new millennium scarcely seems coincidental, as world powers wage a diffuse, seemingly interminable war on terror, which, in turn, spawns vicious civil and sectarian conflicts and mass migrations of war refugees. The war on terror begets the terror of war in the militarized civilian zones perceived to harbor terrorists. The audience both signs up for and is then held captive in the theatrical conflict zone when attending a production with such contemporary frisson. What draws people to sign up for three hours or seven hours of theatrical wartime violence, particularly when directorial choices link "medieval" violence to millennial violence? Both productions used design and casting to push the events depicted into a vaguely distant past, and pull them into present contextual relevance by turns, leaving theatergoers in an uneasy state of recognition, conscious of the ways in which they are living through a repetition of history outside the theater, seemingly doomed to watch the same tragedies play out (Buccola, *Breath*).[8]

[7] The contrast that Jonathan Kalb offers between film or television and theater, particularly where very long works are concerned, is instructive here:

> The key difference between watching very long works on media and watching them in the theater is in the nature of the communal experience. Because theater confronts us with the physical, real-time presence of toiling performers as well as fellow audience members, it provokes a greater awareness of the body – and of the ticking clock of mortality – than recorded performances can. To that extent, marathon theater is more akin to endurance performance art than to lengthy film, since endurance performers . . . are all deeply and riskily concerned with the experience of the body in time and space. (Kalb 17)

[8] In addition to reviewing *Breath of Kings*, I also wrote and delivered preshow lectures for both halves of *Tug of War* at Chicago Shakespeare Theater and wrote blog posts about the plays for *City Desk 400*, the website hosted by the theater to collect scholarly reflections on the 863 events hosted throughout Chicago over the

Although both productions took steps to stylize the violence that they depicted, war is, fundamentally, a violent act. As Lucy Nevitt notes:

> Much of the ideological status of the canon comes from its relation to history, and history is itself most usually written and communicated in canonical form. Historians speak of *grand narratives*, or overarching representations of events that tell the story of a particular period in broad, general terms. The representation of English history as a monarchical progression, divided up into the reigns of different kings and queens, is a good example of this. So is the identification of particular periods and/or places with selected key events. It is worth noting that these designated events are often wars, revolutions, assassinations or other acts of violence. (Nevitt 40–41)

Crécy, Agincourt, Bosworth Field – these are such places, where such events took place, all duly recorded in the various Shakespearean histories through which these productions marathoned.

As I work on this mammoth writing task, it occurs to me that I am also fashioning my own layer of the Shakespeare-history-marathon matroschka. I have a personal history with these productions and with writing about them. If a book on the subject would be considered a marathon, the parameters of this Element constitute at least a minimarathon. "Let us to it, pell mell" (Greenblatt et al., *Richard III*, 5.4:311).

2 On Your Marks

Both Barbara Gaines and Graham Abbey adapted the plays that they synthesized into their respective productions. In Part 1 of Gaines's *Tug of War*, subtitled *Foreign Fire*, Gaines took the eccentric but illuminating

course of 2016 under the auspices of "Shakespeare 400 Chicago." Those essays have subsequently been edited and published (Buccola, *Tug of War: Civil* and *Tug of War: Foreign*).

course of juxtaposing the seldom-staged *Edward III* directly against a heavily cut version of the oft-staged *Henry V*, skipping entirely over *Richard II* and the two parts of *Henry IV*, the plays that constituted the focus of *Breath of Kings*. Gaines's pairing of *Edward III* and *Henry V* emphasized the many similarities between the plots of the two plays, as well as the overt callbacks to the reign of Edward III in *Henry V*. The prominence of women as powerful political and military operatives in *Edward III* constituted a stronger setup for the theater's ensuing marathon through the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III* than a traditional march through the two tetralogies, since *Richard II* and the two parts of *Henry IV* offer less substantive roles for women than *Edward III* does. Double-casting of significant women's roles in *Edward III*, the *Henry VI* plays, and *Richard III* (chiefly, Karen Aldridge in the roles of both the Countess of Salisbury in *Edward III* and Margaret of Anjou in all but one of the remaining plays covered by the marathon) reinforced the verbal and thematic parallels already present within the play texts. *Foreign Fire* concluded with the play referred to today as *Henry VI*, Part 1 with a cliffhanger created by York's rage at the peace that Henry has brokered with France, which broke forth into active rebellion against and usurpation of Henry VI in the second part of the production.

The second portion of *Tug of War* bore the subtitle *Civil Strife* and focused on the civil wars chronicled in *Henry VI*, Parts 2 and 3 and *Richard III*. *Foreign Fire* and *Civil Strife* were staged months apart, with the former onstage in spring and summer of 2016, and the latter onstage in the fall of 2016. Audience members could opt to see one half of the production without seeing the other, or sign on for the full two-part marathon.

Though the subtitles of Chicago Shakespeare Theater's productions suggested a less clearly positive trajectory than did those of *Breath of Kings*, textual cuts in both *Tug of War* and *Breath of Kings* served to portray Henry V as the leader of a more unified English force than the full text of the play does. Both productions, for example, did away with the Scrope/Cambridge/Grey conspiracy against Henry that immediately precedes his departure for the wars in France. The net effect of this textual cut was to create the impression that Henry sits at the head of a more unified

aristocracy than his predecessors (or, in the case of *Tug of War*, his successors). The narrative weight of this textual excision did heavier lifting to foster a positive interpretation of Henry V's monarchy in *Breath of Kings*, since it constituted the final play in the sequence at Stratford, whereas at Chicago Shakespeare Theater, this heroic Henry was an early blip on a radar screen otherwise littered with fractured and fractious nobles in the remaining four plays of the cycle. *Tug of War* also cut the "English lesson" for Princess Katherine (Greenblatt et al., *Henry V*, 3.6), thus lopping off a significant metonymical exploration of the English conquest of the land that she represents and embodies.[9] *Breath of Kings* dispensed with the joust in *Richard II*, putting the banishment of the feuding Mowbray and Bolingbroke (Greenblatt et al. 1.3) in the gage-throwing scene (Greenblatt et al. 1.1). Abbey's textual cut in this instance served to reinforce the overall impression created of Tom Rooney's Richard II in this production: overly impulsive, petulant, and unfit for rule. The net effect of this finger-on-the-scale portrayal was to exculpate Bolingbroke (played by Abbey himself) in some measure for deposing Richard.

Early in Part 3 of *Henry VI*, the king sits down on a molehill to contemplate the vicissitudes of the battle. In a nesting set of similes, he compares the uncertain, seesaw nature of the conflict to both the dawning of the day and the tempestuousness of a wind-tossed sea.

> This battle fares like to the morning's war,
> When dying clouds contend with growing light,
> What time the shepherd, blowing of his nails,
> Can neither call it perfect day nor night.
> Now sways it this way, like a mighty sea
> Forced by the tide to combat with the wind;
> Now sways it that way, like the selfsame sea
> Forced to retire by fury of the wind:
> Sometime the flood prevails, and then the wind;
> Now one the better, then another best;

[9] A foundational feminist analysis of this scene appears in Howard and Rackin (3–10).