

## Introduction

*Shakespeare Goes Viral*

Imagine then that all this while, Death (like . . . stalking *Tamberlaine*) hath pitcht his tents . . . in the sinfully-polluted Suburbes: the Plague is Muster-maister and Marshall of the field: . . . the maine Army consisting (like *Dunkirke*) of a mingle-mangle.

(Thomas Dekker, 'The Wonderfull Yeaere. 1603'. D1 r)

[T]he publick shew'd, that they would bear their Share in these Things; the very Court, which was then Gay and Luxurious, put on a Face of just Concern, for the publick Danger: All the Plays and Interludes . . . were forbid to Act . . . for the Minds of the People, were agitated with other Things; and a kind of Sadnes and Horror at these Things, sat upon the Countenances, even of the common People.

(Daniel Defoe, *Journal of the Plague Year* [1722] 1992, pp. 28–9)<sup>1</sup>

In March 2020, theatres went dark and screens lit up across Western Europe, Canada and the United States. In Exeter, United Kingdom, where I live, people were hunkering down after a final week of frenzied attempts to get supplies (of all things) of toilet roll, along with bulk purchases of hand sanitiser, dried pasta and tinned tomatoes. Meanwhile in Staunton, Virginia, the American Shakespeare Center's actors got together for one final performance of their touring production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Playing to an empty theatre and filmed by three camera operators who were learning and visibly improving their craft skills in the course of the performance, that production felt like a swansong: a last, desperately joyful,

<sup>1</sup> Defoe's *Journal*, written in 1722 about the plague year of 1665, when he was just five years old, is not as much an eye-witness account as a fictional memoir, based on extensive research, that offers a cautionary tale to contemporary readers at a time when the next outbreak of the bubonic plague was thought to be imminent (Backscheider, 1992).

cobbled-together tribute to an era of communal theatre making and theatre watching that had abruptly come to an end.<sup>2</sup>

As one country after another shut its entertainment industries, daily press conferences communicated infection and death rate statistics along with the latest sets of restrictions on everyday life, ‘non-essential’ workers were furloughed, left unemployed or made to convert their homes into workplaces. Care homes shut their doors and battled with outbreaks that killed many residents. Households went into isolation, parents struggled to combine work with homeschooling their children, and the silence outside our house deepened until birdsong could be heard again, punctured with alarming frequency by the howling of ambulances in the distance.

Locked out of their theatres, actors, managers, producers, backstage creatives and their legal teams leapt into action. Many big theatres that had, over the previous decade, started to extend their reach beyond their local communities by appealing to national and international audiences through digital theatre broadcasts, now rushed to adapt to the ‘new normal’ of isolation by hastily checking and renegotiating broadcast contracts so as to allow them to open up their archives. Audiences worldwide were given free access to past productions but were asked for donations to keep the institutions afloat. Other theatre companies, and freelance performers who rapidly organised into new configurations, retooled almost instantly to continue performing live via videoconferencing platforms, with the Zoom platform emerging as the most commonly used digital stage. Sir Patrick Stewart started to read one Shakespeare sonnet a day, and seasoned actors and novices alike performed monologues to their phone cameras.<sup>3</sup>

Audiences responded by binge watching Shakespeare productions brought into their homes from a range of theatrical cultures and to organise their diaries so as to accommodate the fortnightly *Globe on*

<sup>2</sup> Michelle Manning writes about this production in a draft chapter for her PhD thesis.

<sup>3</sup> For fuller accounts of the range of Shakespeare productions around the world, see Allred and Broadribb (2022); Kirwan and Sullivan (2020); Smith, Valls-Russell and Yabut (2020).

*Screen* streams from Shakespeare's Globe on Monday nights, the weekly live hybrid of Zoom-plus-YouTube performance from the *The Show Must Go Online* series on Wednesdays,<sup>4</sup> the Thursday double bill of streams by the Stratford Festival in Ontario and National Theatre At Home on YouTube, and the weekly *ALMOST live* Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) show on Marquee TV on Saturdays.<sup>5</sup> Companies with smaller archives, such as Cheek by Jowl or Lazarus Theatre, had to squeeze their own streams into this busy schedule. Those who, like me, have an interest in European theatre, additionally slotted in streams from many of the most prominent European houses. To help one another through the maze of available productions, bloggers began to create listings of English-language and European streams. Impromptu 'watch party' communities and Zoom discussion groups sprung up, while on Twitter, hashtags connected with specific streams pulled viewers together into audience groups on the hoof.

On social media, memes about how Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* and *Macbeth* while supposedly 'quarantined' during the plague began to spread and eventually got picked up by mainstream media. An allusive cartoon in *The New Yorker* magazine did not even need to mention Shakespeare to make its Shakespearean point (Figure 1). Instead, Maddie Dai made the link explicitly in the tweet with which she shared her cartoon on social media: 'devastated the pandemic has revealed yet another difference between shakespeare and i: he spends quarantine writing king lear, i spend quarantine writing panicked messages to my father, telling him to leave bunnings warehouse [sic]' (@maddiedai, 23 March 2020). Meanwhile, in a full-length article in *The Guardian*, Andrew Dickson trawled through *Romeo and Juliet*, *Timon of Athens* and *King Lear* to find the most repulsive plague metaphors that might have arisen from his direct experience of writing during outbreaks (2020).

In other words, Shakespeare, both as a cultural figure and in the shape of his plays, 'went viral'. Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley (2013, p. 16) define

<sup>4</sup> The series had started on Thursdays but moved to Wednesdays once the NT live shows began to screen on Thursdays.

<sup>5</sup> @TheRSC tweet, 10:20 a.m., 27 March 2020.

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*“Day 6! Couldn’t decide between starting to write my novel or my screenplay, so instead I ate three boxes of mac and cheese and then lay on the floor, panicking.”*

Figure 1 ‘Day 6!’ *New Yorker* cartoon, 23 March 2020. © Maddie Dai

such virality in media as ‘a social information flow process where many people simultaneously forward a specific information item, over a short period of time, within their social networks, and where the message spreads beyond their own [social] networks to different, often distant networks, resulting in a sharp acceleration in the number of people who are exposed to the message’. Shakespeare thus began to be associated with extraordinary productivity and creative genius that was linked to the newly widespread scenario of social isolation for fear of contagion. At the same time, he also paradoxically became a figure for community at a time of isolation, and the ability for art in general and theatre more specifically to reach beyond the boundaries set up by lockdown conditions and connect artists with their audiences and audiences with one another.

*Celebrating Shakespeare in Lockdown*

Just over a month into the United Kingdom's first Covid-19 lockdown, Shakespeare lovers across the world celebrated 'Shakespeare's birthday' on St George's Day, 23 April. This was a day spent entirely online as I launched *Shakespeare, Spectatorship and the Technologies of Performance*, a decidedly pre-pandemic book focused on the rapid expansion in the use of digital performance technologies between 2013 and 2016. Part III of the book, as it turned out, was suddenly highly topical in its concern with the question of how digital theatre broadcasting might create liveness effects for viewers distributed across the globe watching Shakespeare from their individual homes. I had vaguely planned a low-key local book launch sweetened with Devon scones, clotted cream and strawberry jam for my Exeter colleagues. Instead, I was now engaged in a social media campaign that involved a podcast alongside unreasonable amounts of tweeting in both the morning and the afternoon to catch the attention of potential European and North American audiences.

In between tweets to boost the Shakespeare birthday celebration posts of colleagues who were also launching books and giving lectures to mark the occasion, I rewatched parts of Toneelgroep Amsterdam's stream of its Dutch-language production of *Het Temmen van de Feeks/The Taming of the Shrew* (see pp. 43–52 of this Element) and dipped into the stream of *Hamlet* which had just come online the night before from the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin.

In the early afternoon, I participated in a crowdcast research seminar on early modern soundscapes. Then, in preparation for a group discussion on Zoom the next day of the National Theatre's YouTube broadcast of Simon Godwin's 2017 *Twelfth Night* starring Tamsin Greig as Malvolia, I rewatched parts of that *National Theatre At Home* broadcast. I took some time out at 8 p.m. to join the rest of the United Kingdom in the weekly ritual of the one-minute-long round of applause to show our appreciation of the tireless work and sacrifices made by the National Health Service and carers in dealing with the pandemic. I then returned to my screen.

As Europeans arrived towards the end of their Shakespeare celebrations and my family went to bed, more and more events were coming online from the United States.

First off the mark was the Folger Shakespeare Library, which had hosted a series of lecture and workshop streams during the afternoon and now ‘premiered’ a stream of its 2014 co-production of Teller and Aaron Posner’s *Macbeth* as a ‘watchalong’ on its Facebook site. As a family of actors (Ian Merrill Peakes/Macbeth, Karen Peakes/Lady Macduff and their son) cheerily greeted their online audience and introduced the show, extreme fatigue kicked in at my end. Never having been able to see a Shakespeare production in the Folger theatre, I was thrilled to gain virtual access to this space. After a few minutes, however, my concentration began to falter and I got distracted by the little emojis bobbing up across the screen as the roughly 200 participants in the watchalong began to engage with the performance.

Even more distracting were the comments that started to appear on the side of the screen, which were largely phatic, communicating for the sake of communication. Many audience members were greeting one another and the performers, creating a lively dialogue and community of Folger Theatre fans from whom, in my tiredness, I felt increasingly detached and alienated. Having tuned in to connect and celebrate with North American audiences, I now found myself almost actively resisting connection because it was increasingly obvious that we were coming at supposedly the same thing – Shakespeare – from such different contexts and time zones. As they joyously discussed the kilts worn by the performers and admired the spookiness of Teller’s magical artistry in creating the illusions that characterised the appearances of the production’s witches and ghost, I felt ever more dissociated from their experience and communal appreciation.

It was a relief, at 11.30 p.m., to switch to the start of the Canadian watchalong party hosted by the Stratford Festival, Ontario. Here, I found Festival director Antoni Cimolino in a high-brow conversation with Colm Feore, the star of the *King Lear* stream that would start half an hour later. The change in atmosphere was disconcerting: the discussion now ranged from the challenges of playing a political leader to references to current US politics in what turned out to be the final months of the Trump presidency. In stark contrast with the chummy gregariousness of the Folger watchalong, no attempt was made to interact directly

with the *King Lear* audience: this was a carefully curated conversation between elite creatives that viewers were privileged to observe rather than invited to participate in.

When the stream of *King Lear* began, the time had finally come for my final anniversary engagement: the ‘viewing party’ of the National Theatre’s *Twelfth Night* for North American audiences, hosted by the Shakespeare Theatre Company at the Harman Center for the Arts on its brand-new streaming platform, ‘Shakespeare Everywhere’, and featuring Simon Godwin, the production’s director. I was curious about how Godwin would frame his very British production for his American audience. I was also keen to find out whether the kind of veneration of Shakespeare and authenticity that had marked the Folger’s watchalong party would also be evident at this other anniversary event hosted by a venue in Washington, DC. Having equipped myself with a fresh pot of tea and some snacks, I switched to the site – and found the event had been cancelled due to unforeseen technical problems.

‘And so to bed’, as Pepys might say.

### *Viral Shakespeare: A Journal of the Pandemic Year*

I have set this particular down so fully, because I know not but it may be of Moment to those who come after me, if they come to be brought to the same Distress, and to the same manner of making their Choice.

(Daniel Defoe, *Journal of the Plague Year* [1722] 1992, p. 11)

My personal experience of Shakespeare’s birthday, at the peak of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, explains some of the features of this Element, researched and written distractedly and under uniquely pressured conditions during two periods of lockdown, in April to May and November to December 2020. A final retrospective phase of writing and editing was squeezed into May and June 2021, when I was in quarantine for seventeen days. From this vantage point, it is striking just how quickly people are adapting to ever-new situations and are eager to move on from the shock of the first lockdown and leave those memories behind: all the talk is of a roadmap to lifting all restrictions and starting a ‘new normal’. This, in

turn, provides an urgent incentive for finishing this Element while I am still capable of remembering what lockdown *felt* like. Rather than a piece of formal scholarship, therefore, this Element is conceived as a phenomenological history of sorts of watching Shakespeare in this first pandemic year in which I share my responses to some of the unique spectatorial configurations, novel experiences and creative innovations that emerged in the time of pandemic.

In the first lockdown (25 March to July 2020), I binge watched Shakespeare whenever I was not teaching and looking after a cohort of desperately needy and disoriented students who had been sent home mid-term, or doing my bit to clean, wash, cook and care for my family, while also planting potatoes and vegetables in case of food shortages (yes, life really felt that precarious – a year down the line, it seems absurd). Work bled into family life and leisure became work. As restrictions were eased, I spent five months investigating how two British companies, Creation Theatre (Oxford) and Big Telly (Northern Ireland) had managed to pivot from analogue to digital modes of theatre production in record time. The *Digital Toolkit* I produced with Rachael Nicholas was designed to throw a lifeline to other creatives in the theatre industry by helping them with their own digital transformations.<sup>6</sup> As winter approached again and we entered a second lockdown on 31 October, my teenagers were back at school and my students were back at university. Writing time was snatched between asynchronous online teaching and hybrid face-to-face-plus-Zoom classroom sessions.

Accordingly, this Element is written from within the conditions of lockdown, with all that this implies in terms of limited access to all non-digital sources of information, human contact, haircuts, physical exercise and uninterrupted time. It is also written, at breakneck speed in intermittent bursts, from a retrospective viewpoint that is informed by my early modernist's immersion in the past and my current work with researchers

<sup>6</sup> *Digital Theatre Transformation: A Case Study and Digital Toolkit for Small to Mid-scale Theatres in England* was a 'rapid-response' Covid-19 research project I undertook with Rachael Nicholas that was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the United Kingdom between May and October 2020.



committed to analysing and mitigating the effects of the pandemic.<sup>7</sup> Its main focus is the two months following the British prime minister's announcement of the closure of the theatres on 23 March 2020. This first lockdown saw the most viral outbreak of Shakespeare-inspired activity that peaked, almost to absurdity, on that memorable birthday celebration on 23 April, and which began to subside at the end of May, with the arrival of summer. It is, in many ways, a personal memoir of that period, which just a few months later seems already a world away.

In the first part of this Element dedicated to theatre broadcasts of Shakespeare during the first lockdown, therefore, my purpose is twofold. On the one hand, it is to document the extraordinary shift, within the shortest time frame, of Shakespeare performance from a predominantly analogue, communal experience in a single space and time to the almost exclusively digital production, dissemination and consumption of Shakespeare performance as the new norm. That documentation cannot be exhaustive and is of necessity limited to the handful of productions that stood out for me, nor can it be anything but subjective and limited by the languages that I speak or have any hope of understanding, the time zone I inhabit and the professional and social networks to which I have access.

On the other hand, my purpose is to examine the impact this shift has had on the experience of Shakespeare performance. The question of why Shakespeare became such a particularly striking focal point for cultural activity can probably be answered with reference to the need to group around something familiar that carries cultural capital at moments of crisis. A more sophisticated answer might involve pointing out how Shakespeare's plays themselves 'insistently draw on the metaphoric of communicable disease, or make direct allusions to the plague itself and its concomitant quarantine and self-isolation restrictions' (Ristani 2020). More prosaically and realistically, the playwright's convenient copyright status, his inclusion as a compulsory element of secondary education in the United Kingdom

<sup>7</sup> *The Pandemic and Beyond: The Arts and Humanities Contribution to Covid-19 Research and Recovery* is a research coordination project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council; it is running between March 2021 and February 2023.

and the ready availability of Shakespeare in the archives of companies certainly had a role to play in his prominence at this time. What interests me more is the question of how the change in the viewing context and the sheer concentration of broadcast Shakespeares altered both the experience of viewing and the productions themselves.

What happened when different performance cultures were brought into abrupt collision? To what extent and how did viewing communities bond through their common love of Shakespeare within and across time zones? How did the pressure of viewing schedules lend a structure to life in the groundhog-day experience of lockdown? What happened when so many broadcasts of a single play coincided that they began to lose their distinctiveness? Could a live stream from an empty theatre conjure up the ghosts of the past and bridge the gap between the living and the dead? If Shakespeare was the food of love, was there excess of it?

From the vantage point of the second lockdown, in which watch parties had largely disappeared and no more streams were made available by the main broadcast companies, the second part of this Element explores the emergence of the commercial Zoom videoconferencing platform as a new live performance stage. At the heart of this section is the work of Creation Theatre and Big Telly, the two companies that have worked together to co-produce some of the most innovative professional Zoom performances of that period. I consider their *Tempest* – possibly the very first professional Shakespeare production to be reshaped for Zoom performance in April 2020 – and Big Telly’s Halloween show of *Macbeth* (October 2020), which virtually ‘toured’ from Belfast to Oxford, where it had a ‘residency’ with Creation Theatre.

Here, my purpose is to share some of the insights gained from working with Creation Theatre and with Zoë Seaton, the Director of Big Telly, in the summer of 2020 and to map out some of the challenges faced by freelancers in the theatre industry as they confronted an industrial and cultural landscape in which Shakespeare was understood as a common good who should be freely accessible for all, even as creatives were not being paid for their labour. Additionally, I reflect on the affordances of the Zoom platform as a digital stage. How do the platform and its audiences remediate and ‘archive’ the experience of live theatre? How do Zoom’s affordances and the hybrid of