

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Introduction: Special Issue, Digital Representations of Contemporary Shakespeare Performances

Bi-Qi Beatrice Lei

Volume 44, numéro 2, printemps 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1082700ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i2.37527>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Lei, B.-Q. (2021). Introduction: Special Issue, Digital Representations of Contemporary Shakespeare Performances. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 44(2), 183–188. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i2.37527>

Digital Resource Reviews / Comptes rendus sur les ressources numériques*

Introduction: Special Issue, Digital Representations of Contemporary Shakespeare Performances

BI-QI BEATRICE LEI
National Taiwan University

If Plato were asked to compare live theatre with its digital representation, he would no doubt dismiss the latter as derivative, false, lifeless, and soulless. In *Phaedrus*, Plato borrows Socrates's voice to assert the superiority of living speech over dead writing. In contrast with a two-party dialogue of in-person dialectics, written words are finished creations severed from their creator, and as such cannot communicate adequately. Upon the suggestion that writing aids memory, Thamus the Egyptian reacted with this vehement refutation:

If men learn [writing], it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder. And it is no true wisdom that you offer your disciples, but only its semblance.¹

For those who believe in live theatre and its power to communicate, inspire us, and move us, Plato's disparagement of writing would apply to verbal, photographic, and video documentation of performances and its subsequent publishing, digitization, screening, and streaming. Regardless of screen resolution and colour

* The reviews of digital resources are made available here through a partnership with the *Early Modern Digital Review* (EMDR), edited by Laura Estill (St. Francis Xavier University) and Ray Siemens (University of Victoria), and published by Iter Press. The reviews are also found on the EMDR website: emdr.itercommunity.org/index.php/emdr/index.

1. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275a–b, trans. R. Hackforth, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 520.

space or sonic fidelity, a filmed performance can never replicate a live event. “Semblance” is also flouted by Walter Benjamin in his discussion of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Unlike paintings or live theatre, photographs and films lack authenticity or “aura,” and this shift from a “cult value” to an “exhibition value” of art entails a “qualitative transformation of its nature.”² For John Berger, this transformation is destructive and sacrilegious. He laments over the modern means of reproduction: “For the first time ever, images of art have become ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valueless, free.”³

Today’s technology enables the two sides of this dichotomy, presence vs. semblance, to penetrate each other in unprecedented ways, destabilizing the mutual exclusion and hierarchy governing physicality and virtuality. Increasing globalization, democratization, and intersectionalization in all spheres also works to challenge established values and assumptions about authenticity, legitimacy, and authority. The idea that theatre can be ubiquitous, available, and free (or at a discount)—adjectives Berger uses derogatively—indeed seems more appealing than appalling to many. Beyond convenience, utility, and versatility, digital representations of live performances gained new urgency and nobility when the pandemic of COVID-19 took the world by surprise, shutting down brick-and-mortar theatres and schools, restricting travel and gatherings. Productions by the National Theatre made free on its YouTube channel during the UK’s first lockdown in 2020 were immensely popular, accumulating fifteen million views from 173 countries over sixteen weeks.⁴ Without a definite end of the pandemic in sight, digital representation of theatre and live Zoom theatre may continue for some time as the only theatres in many parts of the world.

As well as e-texts and performance videos, theatre archives hosting scripts, designs, music scores, photos, posters, playbills, prompt books, news coverage, reviews, etc.—traditionally of great interest for historians and research scholars only—reach a wider audience when they are digitized and disseminated via the Internet. Stuck at home, people have been spending more of their lives

2. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217–51, 224–25.

3. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Company, 1972), 32.

4. On 1 December 2020, the National Theatre launched National Theatre at Home (ntathome.com), a paid program for on-demand videos, with the following release: “NT Launches New Streaming Service *National Theatre at Home*,” Official London Theatre, officiallondontheatre.com/news/nt-launches-new-streaming-service-national-theatre-home/.

online and their behaviours have shifted: we work, play, and connect online.⁵ A multidimensional digital archive can be an all-in-one platform—theatre, library, gallery, museum, forum, classroom, and more—and personalized as well. With the availability of abundant and diverse materials, supported by cross-references and hyperlinks, a growing network of information has also started to evolve across digital platforms.

Shakespeare is a subject that has engaged numerous digital humanists. Complementing the special issue of *Early Modern Digital Review* on digital Shakespeare texts edited by Laura Estill, the eleven articles here review digital projects on contemporary Shakespeare performances around the world.⁶ While some of these projects extend their timelines from the present back to an earlier time, projects on historical performances such as Early Modern London Theatres (emlot.library.utoronto.ca) and Shakespearean Prompt-Books of the Seventeenth Century (bsuva.org/bsuva/promptbook) are not included. General or educational websites that give equal or heavier weight to branches of Shakespeare studies other than performance—original texts, textual analysis, foreign language translation, history, bibliography, news, pedagogy, etc.—as well as playlists of performance videos hosted elsewhere, such as Bardbox: Shakespeare and Online Video (bardbox.net), are also omitted here. In grouping the eleven projects covered in this issue, I am indebted to Christy Desmet, who maps out three organizational structures in her discussion of online Shakespeare performances: the database, the archive, and the collection.⁷ It is true that these terms are often used interchangeably, and each digital project is a hybrid. Nonetheless, Desmet's categorization illuminates different elemental structures, mentalities, and priorities.

The first four projects reviewed host Shakespeare performances across national and linguistic borders. The MIT Global Shakespeares Video and Performance Archive (globalshakespeares.mit.edu) and the Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive (A|S|I|A, a-s-i-a-web.org) are both ambitious, premier

5. Ella Koeze and Nathaniel Popper, "The Virus Changed the Way We Internet," *New York Times*, 7 April 2020, [nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/07/technology/coronavirus-internet-use.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/07/technology/coronavirus-internet-use.html).

6. Laura Estill, ed., "Digital Shakespeare Text," special issue, *Early Modern Digital Review* 2.3 (2019), doi: 10.25547/emdr.v2i3.67).

7. Christy Desmet, "The Art of Curation: Searching for Global Shakespeares in the Digital Archives," *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* 11.1 (2017), openjournals.libs.uga.edu/borrowers/article/view/2411).

projects, each marshalling an enormous international team to collect, edit, translate, and curate the materials in multiple languages. *Hamlet* as Japanese *Noh* and as Jordanian musical comedy, *Romeo and Juliet* in the Southeastern Asian dance *igal* and in Brazilian street theatre, and *Macbeth* using Chinese martial arts and Vietnamese folk music, the diverse theatre productions presented by these two websites truly enhance our experience and expand our imagination of Shakespeare. In addition to performance information and videos, both websites feature useful research and teaching tools. By comparison, Performance Shakespeare 2016 (performanceshakespeare2016.org) is a technically lightweight blog, but no less a treasure house. Showcasing more than four hundred productions staged in Shakespeare's anniversary year, each with samplings of photos and video clips, the site serves as a handy entry point to contemporary global performances. Reviewing Shakespeare (bloggingshakespeare.com/reviewing-shakespeare) achieves the same effect of offering glimpses of Shakespeare performances along with scholarly reviews and photos contributed by multiple authors. Following what Lev Manovich calls "database logic,"⁸ these four *databases* relying on scholarly crowdsourcing downplay the role of the narrator though the degrees of curation vary. They complement one another and together offer a more complete picture of today's Shakespeare performances around the world. Their concepts and practices of "global" Shakespeare, however, may be contested. Adopting an Asian perspective, A[S]I[A] supports Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, in addition to English, and foregrounds inter-Asia communication and collaboration. The other three projects, by contrast, allegedly tilt toward the West. Reviewing Shakespeare covers predominantly productions performed in Europe and North America; Performance Shakespeare 2016 lists eleven countries with only one production, namely Shakespeare's Globe's Globe to Globe *Hamlet*; full-length videos for Anglo-American, "mainstream" Shakespeare groups are noticeably missing at the MIT Global Shakespeares, which prompts us to ask, like Poonam Trivedi did at the ninth World Shakespeare Congress in Prague, how "global" comes to equal "the rest of the world."⁹ Much remains to be done to strike balance in the global community.

8. Lev Manovich, "Database as a Symbolic Form," *Millennium Film Journal* 34 (1999), accessed 21 June 2021, mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ34/Manovich_Database_FrameSet.html.

9. Poonam Trivedi is a regional editor of MIT Global Shakespeares, so her comment should be taken as self-reflection instead of criticism.

The next four articles review national *archives* for performing and adapting Shakespeare in Canada, Spain, Taiwan, and the Philippines using varied approaches. Because of their clear focus on a single locale, these projects suggest a chronological narrative and sustenance historicization, contextualization, and intertextual and influence studies. Their documentation of older productions, many without photos or videos, helps to trace Shakespeare's trajectory, development, and evolution into the present time. The Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project (CASP, canadianshakespeares.ca) explores local adaptations, equipped with an anthology of scripts, a bibliography for research, as well as a searchable database containing production information and videos. Shakrep: Shakespearean Performance in Spain (um.es/shakespeare/representaciones) is the performance archive under a larger project entitled The Reception of Shakespeare's Works in Spanish and European Cultures (um.es/shakespeare), which also includes a translation database and an online library. Taiwan Shakespeare Database (shakespeare.digital.ntu.edu.tw) offers extensive metadata and full-length performance videos within historical and cultural contexts on a bilingual (English and Chinese) platform, and its collaboration with both the MIT Global Shakespeares and A|S|I|A further supports comparative approaches across cultures. Shakespeare in the Philippines: A Digital Archive of Research and Performance (archivingshakespeare.wordpress.com) lists productions by performance groups and extends its content beyond theatre performances to embrace relevant events and conferences. Whereas the global sites facilitate horizontal comparisons across linguistic and cultural borders, these national sites enable vertical comparisons across time alongside the society's political, social, economic, aesthetic, and ideological development.

The last group of articles reviews three paid on-demand streaming platforms. Many theatre companies have used performances filmed by multiple stationary and moving cameras to engage wider audiences and to bring in extra revenues, via distribution on DVD or Blu-ray media and to cinemas around the world. During the COVID-19 pandemic, theatre companies looked to the Internet to reach their audiences, hosting watch parties on YouTube and Facebook. Shakespeare's Globe was well-prepared for the crisis: it was the first theatre to launch its streaming video service Globe Player (globeplayer.tv) in 2015, with a rent or buy option for individual or bunched productions.¹⁰ The

10. "Shakespeare on Demand: Globe Theatre Launches Digital Player," *The Guardian*, 4 November 2014, theguardian.com/culture/2014/nov/04/shakespeare-on-demand.

Stratford Festival, which had been screening “Stratford Festival on Film” in movie theatres, adapted quickly and started a subscription program Stratfest@Home (stratfordfestival.ca) in 2020. In addition to full-length performance videos, both theatres also furnish their sites with educational materials: talks, interviews, and documentaries. In contrast to web platforms operated by individual theatres, Drama Online (dramaonlinelibrary.com) is a one-stop shop for mainstream Shakespeare in the UK and North America, supported by Bloomsbury’s extensive Shakespeare publications and filmed performances of many major companies—the Royal Shakespeare Company, the National Theatre, the American Shakespeare Center, BBC Studios, as well as the Globe Theatre and the Stratford Festival. These three online platforms, especially Drama Online, can well be considered as self-sufficient *collections*.

A major reason for Socrates’s objection to writing is that, once absent, the parent-creator of a composition loses control over its interpretation and is thus disempowered. Conversely, digitization of live theatre empowers the user, who is no longer a passive spectator but can now play and replay a performance staged long ago and far away, isolate or skip a scene, fast-forward or rewind, make a clip for sharing, check out the performer’s background, read varied reviews, compare multiple productions side by side, and even participate in discussion forums. Yet, while digital technology remarkably democratizes theatre by weakening the auteur/authority and strengthening the user/mass, it also exposes the disparity between those who have and those who have not. A decent device and high-speed Internet are necessary for video streaming. A paywall blocks underprivileged users from viewing prestigious Anglo-American Shakespearean theatres, which in turn are then noticeably absent from open-access platforms like the MIT Global Shakespeares. Teachers and students at non-research institutes do not have the option to purchase an individual membership for Drama Online. Beyond income inequality, imbalances of world power are also manifested in the implicit divide between the dominant West and the exploited “global.” Through this digital revolution, Shakespeare reaches more people, in more places, at more times, posing more questions, philosophical, ethical, and political.