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Ridout, Jenny, project dir. Drama Online. Database

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Ridout, Jenny, project dir.

Drama Online. Database.

London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013. Accessed 12 December 2020.
dramaonlinelibrary.com.

Digital resources proved to be invaluable during the COVID-19 pandemic. As libraries, theatres, and cinemas shuttered, scholars and students became reliant on streaming services to access many of the materials they needed for scholarly research and classes. One digital resource, Drama Online, is designed to supply many scholarly and pedagogical materials electronically. The database includes a number of Shakespeare-related texts and films, but it also offers other dramatic modules. Bloomsbury Publishing, who crafts this resource, describes the collection thus:

Drama Online has been created as a response to the need for a high-quality online research tool for drama and literature students, professors, and teachers. It combines exclusively available playtext content and scholarly publications with filmed live performances, film adaptations, and audio plays. Drama Online is a fast-growing study resource which now features 2,750 playtexts from 1,000 playwrights, 400 audio plays, 345 hours of video, and 370 scholarly books from leading theatre publishers and companies, offering a complete multimedia experience of theatre.¹

In response to the lockdown, Drama Online made many of its materials widely available without charge throughout the Spring of 2020. While many people still faced inordinate challenges as they tried to continue their academic work, such welcome gestures undoubtedly supported scholars, teachers, and students who were suddenly separated from the resources they normally rely upon. At the same time, this rapid shift to online teaching and research shined significant light upon the disparities between institutions able to support substantial investments in databases like Drama Online—which provide access to films, audio productions, scripts, critical materials, photographs, and other items related to contemporary theatrical practices—and those who either cannot

1. “COVID-19 Response,” Drama Online, News and Updates, accessed 27 November 2020, dramaonlinelibrary.com/news-and-updates. <https://www.bloomsbury.com/dr/digital-resources/products/drama-online/>.

afford them or choose to allocate their budgets elsewhere. While I am fortunate enough to work at a university boasting a robust library infrastructure, which facilitated my own work during the pandemic,² I regularly field enquiries from colleagues asking which streamed resources I assign to my students. I am often stymied in my replies, since I know that these materials can be pricey and may not be available to those who ask. Drama Online modules are available through subscription or purchase (with an ongoing hosting fee) and the cost varies according to a range of circumstances. In addition, it is difficult to ascertain how these prices correspond to resources acquired for STEM fields. Consequently, as many humanities programs and budgets face increasing financial pressures, Drama Online and similar packages may or may not be viable options during times when digital materials are increasingly in demand. Currently, these subscriptions are not available to individuals, so those not affiliated with institutions supporting these materials are not able to access them in this format. According to Emory's Bloomsbury Digital Resources representative:

Drama Online is a multi-collection, digital research hub available via subscription or perpetual access. The Core Collection is available via subscription (\$1,139 to \$7,573) or perpetual access (\$8,476 to \$55,865) with hosting fees of \$100 to \$600 accompanying perpetual access purchases. Content updates are be available for separate purchase or included in the subscription price. Pricing is based on institution size and type. Consortia discounts may apply (OnlineSalesUS@bloomsbury.com; OnlineSalesUK@bloomsbury.com; OnlineSalesANZ@bloomsbury.com).

Those with institutional subscriptions or purchases gain a myriad of valuable items, gleaned from the Shakespearean realm in recent years, provided that their institution buys and rents the collections most pertinent to their needs. The material available is extensive, since it is curated and marketed by Bloomsbury. Texts from Arden, Faber & Faber, Nick Hern, and Methuen provide substantial critical resources for teaching and research. In addition, there are streamed productions from a variety of important theatres and other venues, including

2. Sheila T. Cavanagh, "'My Prison House': Teaching about Incarcerated Shakespeareans during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *The Electronic Sixteenth Century Journal: The Journal of Early Modern Studies* (7 July 2020), accessed 27 November 2020, escj.org/blog/%E2%80%9Cmy-prison-house%E2%80%9D-teaching-about-incarcerated-shakespeareans-during-covid-19-pandemic.html.

performances from sites such as the Royal Shakespeare Company, Shakespeare's Globe, Canada's Stratford Festival, the Donmar Warehouse, National Theatre Live, and the BBC's *The Hollow Crown*. There are also a number of Shakespeare productions in the audio archive from the LA Theatre Works. These collections are generally packaged individually and provide invaluable access to many of the most acclaimed Shakespearean performances from the past few years. Collected during times when live theatre attendance was possible, this selection includes many of the productions that Shakespeare scholars would flock to in person, and shepherd groups of students to view, as finances and geography allowed. Notably, however, the collections do not include all the performances that Shakespeareans watched in person or freely streamed earlier in the pandemic. Not all of the productions offered electronically from National Theatre Live or the Stratford Festival over the summer of 2020, for instance, are included in the library collections. At least for the moment, therefore, subscribers with the appropriate package can access Benedict Cumberbatch's *Richard III* from *The Hollow Crown* (or his *Frankenstein*), but not his turn as Hamlet. In addition, although National Theatre Live regularly presents productions from a range of theatres and consistently offers striking performances of Shakespeare, not all the notable recent productions are available. The Bridge Theatre's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Almeida's *Richard II*, for example, are not currently included. There are, of course, limits to what any one database can offer.

Nevertheless, these streamed materials offer scholars and students a range of stellar performances, including productions demonstrating some of the broad range of casting decisions now being made, including Maxine Peake's and Michelle Terry's performances as Hamlet, Tamsin Greig's presentation of Malvolia, the all-female Donmar Warehouse Trilogy, and several productions including BIPOC actors and/or differently abled performers. Those seeking more traditionally structured productions can choose from a bountiful assortment of performances, many of which feature established stage icons or rising stars of the new millennium. Subscriptions accommodate an unlimited number of viewers, so scholars, teachers, and students gain broad accessibility to productions that can be used for a variety of academic goals. The multiple camera angles employed and the use of numerous sophisticated technological resources mean that viewers see broader and closer perspectives than would be possible during in-person performances. Simultaneously, of course, those watching lack the advantage of being surrounded by fellow audience members

and lose the ability to shift their gaze beyond the direction that the photographers offer. They also receive less visceral information about the role of some facets of these productions, such as sound, music, and lighting. Nevertheless, gaining access to these performances will facilitate a number of previously impossible classroom engagements and will support numerous scholarly projects.

Depending on individual institutional subscription, teachers and students also acquire a range of scripts, images, critical materials, pedagogical modules, interviews, and performance exercises. This array of resources undoubtedly proved invaluable during the sudden change to online education and research that so many experienced in 2020. The breadth of materials is significant and offers many of the resources needed for remote learning and scholarship. There are also helpful technical aspects, such as search facilities that enable users to locate plays according to thematic elements or the number of characters involved. Such features mark important ways that computer technology can support innumerable academic projects, although there are numerous ways that the database could use a more sophisticated search mechanism, particularly one more attuned to the needs and interests of Shakespeareans. In addition, there are technical aspects of this database that may frustrate some users, particularly students who are only interacting with this product occasionally. It is not always evident, for instance, which items an individual institution subscribes to. There is a box to click that limits searches to items under subscription, but it would be easy for students (or others) to miss this option. If one undertakes a broader search, many items appear with the image of a closed lock and a notification that these materials are only available through subscription. It would also be extremely easy for less savvy users not to realize that needed books or videos might actually be available at one's institution, even if they are licensed or provided through outlets other than Drama Online. Scholars are often used to having to search broadly or request assistance from librarians when they are trying to determine what their institution provides in different formats, but this could prove to be an insurmountable barrier for those with less research experience. Those wanting their students to employ this resource might do well to spend a little instructional time pointing out the features and the hindrances associated with the product. My university, for example, does not subscribe to the "Theatre Craft" materials available through Drama Online. Thus, when I limit my investigations to things we have access to through this database, none of those items appears. When I broaden my search, however, I encounter

a lengthy list of resources, many of which can be obtained directly through my library search engine. While many aspects of this database are intuitive, therefore, taking a step backwards is helpful for maximum efficiency and value.

Drama Online is a valuable resource, even though it contains inevitable limitations. Those wishing to access less popular plays, for instance, have far fewer available resources than those focusing on Shakespearean standards. At the same time, however, the database includes some productions of plays by Shakespeare's contemporaries, such as the Globe's presentation of *The Duchess of Malfi* in the Sam Wanamaker Theatre. No one knows how long it will be before the world's theatres can regain momentum or how robust their recovery may be. Under these circumstances, resources such as Drama Online are even more important and appreciated.

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