



Introduction

Robert Shaughnessy

The chapters in this volume began their life at the Applying Shakespeare symposium, co-hosted by the Shakespeare Institute (University of Birmingham), University of Kent and Guildford School of Acting, University of Surrey, which was held in Stratford-upon-Avon in March 2018. The first event of its kind in the United Kingdom, the symposium drew together scholars, service professionals, practitioners and participants in Shakespeare and applied and socially engaged theatre (an umbrella term for a range of performance forms, often in non-theatrical spaces and with an agenda of personal or social change) to consider how, when these two fields converge, the results can often be transformative for those involved. The contributions and conversations addressed Shakespeare in relation to a range of topics, including learning difficulties, diversity, disability arts, mental health, performance in custodial settings, therapeutic interventions, accessibility, social inclusion, pedagogy, relaxed performance and activism; all were fuelled by what Helen Nicholson has called ‘an aspiration to use drama to improve the lives of individuals and create better societies’, and by the conviction that ‘applied

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drama is primarily concerned with developing new possibilities for everyday living rather than segregating theatre-going from other aspects of life'.¹ James Thompson raises the stakes even further: theatre, like all good art, is a matter of joy, and 'participation in the joyful', he urges, 'is part of a dream of a "beautiful" future, in the sense that it becomes an inspirational force', acting 'to make visible a better world'.²

Socially engaged Shakespeare, in this setting, takes its place alongside the diverse array of performance practices that grew out of the politically engaged, educational and community theatre activities of the final decades of the twentieth century; as the articles in this volume reflect and the symposium participants recognised, the encounter between a canonical cultural force that has been both revered and contested and work that frequently characterises itself as egalitarian, inclusive and anti-elitist is by no means a simple or straightforward one. If access to Shakespeare's work, especially for those groups or individuals habitually excluded from it, is readily acknowledged as something akin to a universal cultural (even human) right, it can also equally readily lend itself to narratives of Shakespeare's anodyne universality; sometimes it is worth asking how much the perceived transformative power of Shakespeare in performance lies in the former term (Shakespeare) rather than the latter (performance). At the same time, we should remember that all Shakespeare is, in its own way, socially engaged, to the extent that it will be concerned with the needs and interests of its audiences, whether this be the relatively narrow demographic served by the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon, or the rather more diverse group of theatre-goers that attend the reconstructed Shakespeare's Globe on London's South Bank. One of the aims of this volume is to offer a space for the stories of audiences that have largely been excluded from existing accounts of Shakespeare's performance history.

The collection contributes to a growing body of performance scholarship addressing Shakespeare as a socially engaged phenomenon. While the literature on Shakespeare and pedagogy is extensive and long-established, other applications have more recently begun to attract sustained and widespread attention. Shakespeare in prisons, for example (especially in the United States), has been the subject of numerous writings, a biennial conference and a number of book-length studies;³ Shakespeare's potential for those working with

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neurodiversity (including autism and dementia) has also attracted interest.⁴

Sue Emmy Jennings opens with an imaginative exploration of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from the long-term perspective of a theatre practitioner and dramatherapist, paying particular attention to the play's scope for engagement with dream states and altered consciousness, and focusing on her work with the Senoi Temiar peoples in Malaysia. Drawing upon psychotherapeutic accounts of child attachment and development, Jennings finds strong resonances between these and the parent–child conflicts, and their resolution, in Shakespeare's play: *Dream*, she suggests, offers a structure of journey and return, from order to controlled chaos and back again, that mirrors the imaginative trajectories of dreamwork and trance. In Jennings' account of *Dream*, the forest is less a literal than a metaphorical space; for Katherine Steele Brokaw and Paul Prescott, the real-world sylvan environment of Yosemite National Park is the setting for the annual outdoor, site-specific productions of Shakespeare staged to mark both Shakespeare's birthday and World Earth Day. Focusing upon the inaugural 2017 production, an hour-long collage of Shakespearean texts and excerpts from the work of early eco-activist John Muir, Brokaw and Prescott offer this as an instance of how Shakespeare can be creatively mobilised in the service of environmental awareness and activism. Invoking the performance anthropologist Dwight Conquergood's modelling of the 'three C's' of applied and socially engaged theatre (Creativity/Imagination, Critique/Inquiry and Citizenship/Intervention), they argue that the 'instrumentalisation' of Shakespeare for social ends enhances rather than diminishes its aesthetic value and power.

In this respect, their position aligns with that of Thompson, cited above; it is worth noting that Thompson's own insistence on the primacy of the aesthetic in applied theatre (an emphasis he describes as a shift from *effect* to *affect*) was shaped not just by arguments within the field but, more importantly, by the traumatic personal experience of an applied theatre project that he ran at a rehabilitation centre for surrendered child soldiers in Sri Lanka in 2000, which several months later was the scene of a massacre.⁵ The place of applied performance, and of Shakespeare, in a former war zone is also the focus of Maja Milatović-Ovadia's chapter, which documents her work with the charitable organisation Most Mira (Bridge of Peace) in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and in particular the project *Shakespeare's*

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Fools, mounted in 2013 and 2014, which made use of Shakespeare's comedies to bring together ethnically-segregated school pupils as a contribution to the peace and reconciliation process. Shakespeare's work in this context, precisely because it did *not* directly confront the war and recent history, offered participants in the project a safe space which enabled them to begin to renegotiate the legacy of recent atrocities, and to glimpse future possibilities of peaceful co-existence.

Shakespeare for young people beyond the structures of formal education is the subject of Karl Falconer's chapter, the first of five chapters addressing the uses of Shakespeare in both formal and informal pedagogic settings. Reflecting on the work of his Liverpool-based PurpleCoat company, Falconer argues that a performance-based mode of Shakespearean pedagogy encourages access to the works for those individuals and communities who, by virtue of gender, race and, especially, class, are frequently alienated by, or excluded from them. As Falconer recognises, engaging working-class young people with Shakespeare is a complex business, fraught with ambivalence, on the one hand an opportunity for empowerment and enrichment, on the other a means to take ownership of cultural capital. Questions of access and ownership also inform Sheila T. Cavanagh and Steve Rowland's account of their involvement in an educational collaboration between undergraduate students at Emory University, Atlanta, and the inmates of Monroe Correctional Facility, Washington State, whereby the two groups study Shakespeare alongside and in dialogue with each other. Examining the points of convergence and difference between the expectations and experiences of incarcerated and non-incarcerated students, Cavanagh and Rowland show how, for the latter especially, the more extreme content of Shakespeare's plays (family dysfunction, violence, murder) is often painfully reminiscent of personal histories; reflecting preoccupations that have become newly urgent in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States and elsewhere, they also highlight the importance of race to the carceral experience, and to these histories. The shared Shakespeare programme, they suggest, changes student perceptions of the incarcerated as well as prisoners' perceptions of students and themselves, and can play an important role in the rehabilitation process. Rowan Mackenzie's chapter, which follows, extends and develops the investigation of prison Shakespeare within the UK context, deploying Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault's theorizations of physical and institutional space to examine an on-

going initiative at HM Prison Leicester. Originating in a two-week arts festival, Talent Unlocked, in 2017, this project centred on *Othello*, initially on the grounds that its representation of sexual jealousy would resonate with inmates separated from their partners; as the work progressed, Mackenzie documents, members of the project found in Shakespeare both a means for self-exploration and a space for thinking beyond the confines of the prison regime. Writing from the perspective of prison-theatre facilitators and educators, Frannie Shepherd-Bates and Kate Powers address the implications of gender for the work that can be undertaken within carceral regimes in the United States, reflecting on the different kinds of activity and strategies of engagement that are possible or necessary when working with male and female inmates. They place a particular value on the capacity of Shakespeare work to accommodate not just a plurality of viewpoints but also the quality of ambiguity, something rarely entertained within the prison system.

Applied Shakespeare, as mentioned above, includes a strong element of engagement with users and communities whose diversity is marked by difference or disabilities of various kinds. Tracy Irish and Abigail Rokison-Woodall's chapter details one such initiative in an account of their work with Shakespeare for the d/Deaf community, the outcome of an ongoing collaboration between the Shakespeare Institute and the Royal Shakespeare Company. Much more than an access programme for deaf participants, 'Signing Shakespeare' is also a celebration of the potential of signing to enrich, diversify and transform the language(s) of Shakespeare itself – a potential inherent, in different ways, in all of the activities and interventions covered in this book.

In the final chapter, Susanne Greenhalgh offers a perspective that also applies, to varying degrees, to all of the contributions in this issue. Addressing the television documentary subgenre that concerns itself with applied Shakespeare stories, Greenhalgh anatomises its prevailing tendency towards narratives of self-realisation and self-discovery, rehabilitation and redemption. Examining a range of examples that include Hank Rogerson's well-known *Shakespeare Behind Bars* (2005) and William Jessop's BBC documentary *Growing Up Down's* (2015), which follows Blue Apple Theatre Company's production of *Hamlet*, Greenhalgh identifies the filmic mechanisms that produce and reinforce the message that Shakespeare can create quasi-therapeutic, highly individualized solutions to problems that

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might be better seen as intractably social and political. By highlighting applied Shakespeare as a subject of representation in itself, Greenhalgh concludes by returning us to the question implicitly posed by Nicholson and Thompson: how can Shakespeare contribute to new ways of thinking and doing not just theatre but everyday life? chapters in this volume offer a sample of the range and variety of work that seeks to answer it. As both the scholarly discipline and theatre practice continue to develop and promote a more diverse and inclusive approach to their own activities, this work can only grow in importance.

Robert Shaughnessy is Professor of Theatre and Director of Research at Guildford School of Acting, University of Surrey. He has published extensively on Shakespeare in performance on stage and screen, contemporary drama and British theatre history. His most recent books are *Shakespeare in Performance: As You Like It* (2016) and *Shakespeare in the Theatre: The National Theatre, 1963–1975* (2018).

Notes

1. Helen Nicholson, *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 3–4.
2. James Thompson, *Performance Affects: Applied Theatre and the End of Effect* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2.
3. See, for example, Jean Trounstein, *Shakespeare Behind Bars: One Teacher's Story of the Power of Drama in a Women's Prison* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004); Amy Scott-Douglas, *Shakespeare Inside: The Bard Behind Bars* (London: Continuum, 2007); Niels Herold, *Prison Shakespeare and the Purpose of Performance: Repentance Rituals and the Early Modern* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Rob Pensalfini, *Prison Shakespeare: For These Deep Shames and Great Indignities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Rowan Mackenzie, *Creating Space for Shakespeare: Working with Marginalized Communities* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2023). The Shakespeare in Prisons Conference was launched at the University of Notre Dame in 2013.
4. See Robert Shaughnessy, "All Eyes": Experience, Spectacle and the Inclusive Audience in Flute Theatre's *Tempest*', in *Shakespeare: Actors and Audiences*, ed. Fiona Banks (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2018), 119–138; 'The Wind and the Rain: Facing Dementia in *Lear/Cordelia* and *The Garden*', in *Performing Psychologies: Imagination, Creativity and Dramas of the Mind*, ed. Nicola Shaughnessy and Philip Barnard (London: Methuen, 2019), 85–98.
5. Thompson, *Performance Affects*, 15–42.

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