

Towards Ecocriticism in Performance

SAA 2016 New Orleans

Leader: Randall Martin, University of New Brunswick

Thursday 24 March, 3.30-5.30 pm

Abstracts

Simon Estok, Sungkyunkwan University

“And keep eternal spring-time”: Performing Shakespeare’s Strange Weather in our Very Strange Times

Shakespeare’s fantasies of a man with a magic staff who can control the weather is nothing short of terrifying, the more so because it was written within the context of what seems the first clearly identifiable anthropogenic global climate event: the little ice age. What exactly does it mean, in the context of the little ice age, to bring weather onto the stage as an agential entity, a virtual character? And what does it mean, in the context of global efforts to keep below 2 degrees warming, to perform early modern weathers on stage? Evelyn O’Malley asks in her abstract for this seminar, “Can Shakespeare in the weather get beyond thematic resonance?” I would like to revise the question and ask *to what degree* can Shakespeare in the weather get beyond thematic resonance? If, as Theresa J. May has so succinctly put it, “plays begin where texts leave off,” then what use can Shakespeare’s weather today perform?

Jean Feerick, John Carroll University

“Tragicomic Romance, Nature’s Wonders, and *Pericles’s* Seascape of the Mind”

In this paper I will explore how an early modern dramatic form might be said to authorize an ecologically viable ethos in promoting an ideal of nature/culture composites. My thinking about patterns of hybridity among human and nonhuman agents builds on Latour’s work in *The Politics of Nature* and *We Have Never Been Modern*, where he proposes that the modern love affair with a notion of pristine “Nature” bedevils the ecological enterprise, offering as an alternative a concept of nature/culture hybrids as a model of human interaction with the ambient world. In Shakespeare’s day, the emerging genre of tragicomic romance was already practicing a version of such thinking in its meditations on Nature’s wonders and

how human activities – including theater – might be able to artfully simulate such effects. In the context of a reading of *Pericles*, I will argue that the play imagines the human as fully embedded with the natural world – not least in how the play imagines the faculty of human cognition. I will then suggest that the play builds on this awareness to consider how humankind might partner with nature to make artful wonders that bring shape to cognitive life. The effect is to transform a sense of people as nature’s victims to her co-creators.

David Hartwig, The Ohio State University at Lima

“Adaptation Theory and Ecocritical Performance: *The Tempest on Ice*”

This paper begins by exploring the ways that adaptation theory can inform an ecocritical reading of performance: especially how theatrical adaptation transforms the literary/dramatic work through its staging. It questions whether it is only by metaphor that we use the evolutionary term adaptation to define the way theatre can “make fit” a play for the 21st century. The paper will then turn to a practical example: Rupert Goold’s *The Tempest* (RSC, 2006), set on an arctic island, and consider how the theory can be tested in regards to this individual case study.

Evelyn O’Malley, University of Exeter, England

“Weathering Shakespeare”

This paper’s subject is Shakespeare in the weather. Reflecting upon the outcomes of my PhD thesis, which consisted of an ethnography of audience responses to Shakespeares performed outdoors, the paper is a provocation based on questions arising from the research. In light of the nonhuman turn, the almost-too-obvious performance of ‘culture’ (a Shakespeare play) enacted in ‘nature’ (an outdoor environment) becomes a useful position from which to examine the much-problematized nature/culture binary. The outdoor environment profoundly affects how audience members articulate their experiences of these performances and our current accounts of these performances do not do justice to the affective nonhuman agencies at work. Can Shakespeare in the weather get beyond thematic resonance? The best of Shakespeare bellowed at the sky can’t change the weather.

Scott Maisano, University of Massachusetts, Boston

“Return to the Poet of the Apes”

At the 2012 SAA I gave a talk entitled “Rise of the Poet of the Apes” about how Shakespeare monkeys with human-simian boundaries—on both page and stage—in *Hamlet*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Tempest* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. This paper is a continuation, or sequel (if you will), to that talk. Here I focus on nonhuman primate performance in several recent adaptations and appropriations of Shakespeare’s plays: BBC’s *The Hollow Crown: Richard II* (Ben Whishaw’s Richard owns a pet monkey); Benjamin Hale’s novel *The Evolution of Bruno Littlemore* (in which a talking chimpanzee stars in *The Tempest*); Animal Planet’s *Romeo & Juliet: A Monkey’s Tale* (featuring edited footage of macaque monkeys in Lopburi Thailand); Alexander McCall Smith and Tom Cunningham’s opera *Okavango Macbeth* (in which human actors portray baboons); and finally my own play-in-progress, *Enter Nurse, or, Love’s Labour’s Won*, a comedy that attempts to imitate or “ape” Shakespeare, including (but not limited to) the aforementioned monkeying with human-simian boundaries.

Amy Rodgers, Mount Holyoke College

“‘Shadows of Elysium’: Akira Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* and Environmental Lament”

Numerous critics (Orfall, 2009; Hsiung, 2009; Suzuki, 2006; and Jorgens, 1983); understand Akira Kurosawa’s 1957 *Throne of Blood* as deeply imbricated with the sociopolitical ramifications of the Second World War on Japan. Rather than consider Kurosawa’s film as primarily a meditation on Japan’s defeat or the catastrophic loss of life incurred by the US nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I read it as a meditation on ecological disaster, one that by 1957, had extended well beyond the aftermath of WWII. For example, the United States engaged in nuclear testing in the Pacific between 1946 and 1958, and testing on the Bikini Atoll in particular led to widespread concern about Japan’s fisheries being contaminated. While I do not wish to make the case that Kurosawa actively engages in overt ecocritical Shakespearean adaptation, in reading *Throne of Blood* thusly, I hope to offer insights into a particular moment of the prehistory of ecocriticism, one that explores emergent ideas of environmental catastrophe during the Cold War period