

2019 Seminar Abstracts: Shakespeare on the Contemporary Regional Stage
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The Shakespeare Project of Chicago (+ Middleton)

Chicago is home to two theater companies committed by name to the works of Shakespeare: Chicago Shakespeare Theater (2008 Tony Award winner for Regional Theatre) and the Shakespeare Project of Chicago. The Shakespeare project was founded in 1995 “to achieve three main goals”; to:

bring to life the words of William Shakespeare and the world's other great dramatists...
 [F]oster the talents of members of Actors' Equity Association, the professional union of actors and stage managers...
 [P]resent the plays to members of our community for free.
 (shakespeareprojectchicago.org)

From their second season in 1996, the Shakespeare Project of Chicago has included non-Shakespearean works in their repertory, including plays by Shakespeare’s contemporaries such as Christopher Marlowe (*Edward II* in 1996) and more recent works with Shakespearean resonance (such as Schiller’s *Mary Stuart* in 2011).

“A successful regional theater, of course, has to strike the right balance, to know its audience and serve its tastes while pushing it, at least on occasion, into new territory” (Zoglin and Goehner online). In the last five years, the Shakespeare Project has branched out considerably, offering audiences at eight venues high-quality, free, staged readings with strong educational programming built around the plays (dramaturgical support for the actors throughout the week-long rehearsal process, a pre-show lecture for the audience by the dramaturge, and a post-show discussion with actors, director and the dramaturge). The rigorous rehearsal process and professionalism of the performances has made them an intriguing laboratory for exploring the staging possibilities of non-Shakespearean early modern plays, allowing for a rich engagement with works often initially unfamiliar to actors and audiences alike. My paper will consider insights from two productions for which I served as dramaturge: *The Revenger’s Tragedy* and *Women Beware Women*, highlighting the performance studies significance of the work done in this regional, staged-reading context.

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**Radical Shakespeare:
 A Student-Built Archive of Local Performance at Moments of Political and Social Crisis.**

This essay discusses the early stages of building an archive of Shakespearean performance in Memphis, TN. Collaborating with students at Christian Brothers University, a regional, Catholic

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university in Midtown, Memphis, we have begun to develop a multimodal platform for exploring political story-telling with Shakespeare. We have designed the archive upon certain core assumptions: that political meaning is created in context; that student readings (like all readings) of a Shakespearean text are shaped by location and knowledge; that story-telling is a form of political engagement; and also, as scholars of the digital humanities have insisted, that multimodal new media might, in some small way, mitigate the erasure of performance in the archive. This essay argues that a digital archive of local Shakespearean performances can open an early modern text to contemporary political discussion, reworking the traditional relationship between students and his plays. I ground this discussion in a case study of a performance of *Julius Caesar* at the Front Street Theatre in 1961, shortly after the theater’s integration, and the critical issues raised: presentism; the intersection of local and global through digitization; and the contest over ownership and meaning in the interpretation of Shakespeare’s works.

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Redefining Southwest Virginia’s Pastoral Landscape in *Shakespeare’s Garden*

My paper will examine *Shakespeare’s Garden*, an immersive theatrical experience at the Moss Arts Center in Blacksburg, VA in March 2018. The directors, Amanda Nelson and Natasha Staley, utilized the unique spatial audio capabilities of a high-tech theatrical space—the Cube—to create an “immersive sound stroll” through Shakespeare’s sonnets, soliloquies, and scenes. As participants wandered the Cube, they stopped in pools of light to listen to audio recordings of Shakespeare’s sonnets (130, 18, 98, 99, 12, and 73), as well as excerpts from *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice*. The composer, Charles Nichols, used regional birdsong to create the sounds of the garden that participants heard when moving between the individual listening points. From a performance perspective, I am interested in how the Cube’s non-traditional theatrical space allowed participants to interact with and meditate on Shakespeare’s work. The “sound stroll,” for instance, turned the written word of poetry into theater and even dialogue, challenging the disconnect between the page and the stage. As a literary scholar, I am particularly interested in how *Shakespeare’s Garden* both participated in and challenged literary definitions of the pastoral genre while incorporating the regional sounds of southwest Virginia’s own pastoral landscape. In this way, *Shakespeare’s Garden* demonstrated how theatrical spaces unique to an individual region create new and exciting opportunities for experiencing Shakespeare.

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Hey, Shakespeare, Won’t You Be My Neighbor?

As a dramaturg and literary consultant to campus productions and as a fairly regular reviewer of Twin Cities performances for Shakespeare Bulletin, I’m interested in the following claim by the organizers of our seminar: “Regionality confers authority on local knowledge, transforming Shakespeare into a neighbor.”

Though I can’t know in advance what I’m going to find, I’m focusing on a Twin Cities company called the Classical Actors Ensemble, which, as I write, has just started performing Middleton’s *Women Beware Women* and Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* (Dec. 2018). Because I’m reviewing only the Middleton for SB, in this paper I’ll examine the company’s pairing of this non-Shakespearean Jacobean tragedy with one of Shakespeare’s most problematic comedies—a very rare repertory offering in the Twin Cities, since CAE is one of the few companies that undertakes non-Shakespearean drama regularly. How does the work of this unusual company reflect and shape Twin Cities Shakespeare?

By way of comparison, I’ll discuss a remarkable 75-minute *Romeo and Juliet* presented in Copenhagen’s Ørstedsparken last spring (2018); it’s the second Danish-language production-in-the-park I’ve seen by the Folketeatret—the first in 2016 was an abbreviated adaptation of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. The Danish troupe offers a different regional production, very much of its time and place—a Copenhagen park in late spring, which is where the Danes live in nice weather. Since I’ve written both about the “house” styles of our local Twin Cities companies and about whether our region has a ‘Shakespeare season,’ I’ll bring the CAE productions into dialog with these Danish adaptations. What light do these local productions shed on ‘Shakespeare’ in their respective regions? How do they construct Shakespeare as a neighbor?

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Small Shakespeare

Over the past quarter century, smaller, regional/local Shakespeare theatres seem to have proliferated across the United States. As part of a larger planned study of these “small Shakespeare” outlets, this paper will establish a methodology for the study of Shakespeare that is staged in and/or for small, localized communities. This methodology is based in theatrical ethnography and community-based practices. The paper then examines two Small Shakespeare venues from disparate locations, and serving very different communities, and outlines the ways in which a methodology must be adapted to local conditions. I argue that Small Shakespeare serves to build communities, both culturally and economically, and provides a diversity of

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readings of Shakespeare that can and should influence Shakespeare in performance more broadly.

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Gender, Troubled

In 2015 the Santa Cruz Shakespeare festival, a regional theater with deep roots in its community for over thirty years, established a gender-equity casting policy. The theater hires men and women to the acting company in equal numbers, and changes the gender of some of the roles to accommodate this practice. The range of public reactions to this news and to the first gender equity productions reflected the theater’s shifting relationship to its academic place of origin, as well as its decades-long status as a beloved community institution. From a dramaturgical and scholarly standpoint, it raises questions of how re-gendering only certain roles (as opposed to, say, using an all-women cast) changes the relationships among characters? How, if at all, does this practice re-shape the narrative or the dramatic stakes? And what do we want the audience to take away from the experience of seeing a play with re-gendered roles?

My paper will explore how gender-equitable casting can illuminate or shift our perspective on a play; how audiences reacted to these changes; and how both critical and popular responses intersect with the social and civic context in which the plays are produced. As a case study, I will focus on Santa Cruz Shakespeare’s 2016 production of Hamlet, in which Hamlet, Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern were all played by women, as women. I served as dramaturg, working on the production and participating in audience engagement, and will discuss the theater company’s work from both these angles.

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**A Shakesperience for Students:
 Staunton’s Blackfriars Playhouse as a Teaching Tool**

This paper explores the performance style implemented at the American Shakespeare Center, in Staunton, VA, and the pedagogical side of the Blackfriars Playhouse (the largest recreation of Shakespeare’s indoor theatre). Part of my research will focus on the performance history of regional theatre in Virginia, in order to establish the theatre’s foundation, but the onus of the paper will examine student response and engagement with the experience of an English Early Modern styled-theatre when participating in a live performance. Although the Blackfriars occasionally modernizes costumes and incorporates present-day music, they follow Original Practices for the most part, and after taking my students to the ASC on five different class trips

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over four years, I have noticed students respond very well to variations of OP, to the space of the recreated theatre, as well as to a city that embraces and highlights its association with Shakespeare. Incorporating attendance to the Blackfriars Playhouse in my courses has invigorated student interest in Shakespeare at my campus, advancing the notion that Shakespeare’s works, particularly in the classroom, must be seen and not just read.

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**Racism, Religion, and Gender-Bending:
 Navigating Audience Responses at the Utah Shakespeare Festival 2018**

This joint paper will explore ways in which audiences responded the artistic and aesthetic choices--specifically related to race, religion, and gender--in productions of *The Merchant of Venice*, *1 Henry IV*, *Othello*, *The Foreigner*, and *Big River* at the Utah Shakespeare Festival in 2018. Regional theatre is inherently place-bound and must necessarily speak to its community. In this case, Utah is a conservative state with predominant religious tradition. It is also a national institution, one of the oldest and most well-recognized Shakespeare Festivals in the country, having won a Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theater in 2000.

As Play Seminar Directors responsible for leading post-show audience discussions, we found challenges in helping regional theater audiences grapple with these pressing topics and current theatrical practices, particularly cross-gender casting. Our paper will discuss selected moments from the audience discussions, supplemented with interviews with the artistic director on the theme and season choices, as well as reflections from directors and actors.

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**Regional Strategies, Transnational Vocabularies:
 upstart crow collective and Women’s Shakespeare in Seattle**

This paper situates two recent all-female productions by upstart crow collective in the regional context of all-female Shakespeare in Seattle, Washington and the transnational production histories of female-directed and all-female cast Shakespeare in the U.S. and the U.K. Focused on Rosa Joshi’s *Bring Down the House*, Parts 1 and 2 (2017) and *Richard III* (2018), my analysis will consider how companies, actors, audiences, and university students use and respond to existing narratives and vocabularies about cross-gendered Shakespeare in staging, viewing, and discussing these productions. In particular, this paper will examine how the interpretive and

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affective responses of these stakeholders emerge from regional factors, such as popular desires for cross-dressed plays in Seattle, and systemic ones, such as disciplinary reactions—from industry and academia—that convey anxieties about the “dangers” all-female productions pose to traditional notions of the Bard. Locating upstart crowd collective’s work within a transnational history of women’s Shakespeare reveals important continuities of experience shared by female practitioners; it also makes visible the unique opportunities afforded to women’s Shakespeare by regionality.

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Site-Specific Shakespeare:
The Purdue University Shrader *Series Twelfth Night*

This paper discusses the Purdue University Department of Theatre’s 2015 production of *Twelfth Night*—a site-specific production performed in the atrium of a lavish local hotel. Among the noteworthy features of this production was its depiction of the steward Malvolio as the only black individual in a dominantly white Illyria. This casting decision mirrored the lack of diversity among students at Purdue University more broadly. For some in the audience, watching Malvolio’s “notorious abuse” at the hands of Feste, Maria, and company brought to mind a series of racially motivated hate crimes that had recently plagued the Purdue campus.

My tentative argument is that the decision to make *Twelfth Night* a traveling production was designed in part to encourage residents of the dominantly white city of Lafayette, Indiana to reconsider any racial prejudices they might harbor. In that the production sought to bring an important message to the community immediately surrounding it, *Twelfth Night* represents a valuable case study of the potential impact of performance in the regional community and the interaction of actors, academics, and audiences at the local level.

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Regional Theatre, International Shakespeare, and Tourist Place:
Gyula’s Várszínház Festival

In this paper, I will examine the complex relationships between tourism, regionalism, national identity, and Shakespearean performance at the Várszínház Festival in the town of Gyula, Hungary (pop. 30,000). Since 1963, the Festival has operated each summer in the town, located near the country’s southeastern border with Romania, and has mounted a season of Shakespeare as part of its overall season since 2005. I will be particularly concerned with the ways that

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Shakespearean performance helps shape Gyula as a tourist place. The town offers tourists thermal-bath spas, shopping and dining experiences, and numerous cultural attractions. Some of these attractions portray the regional history of Gyula’s bourgeois and aristocratic classes. Others, such as the fortified medieval Vár (castle), which features exhibits about the Ottoman occupation of the town (1566-1695), reflect concerns central to Hungarian national identity. The Várszínház complicates the town’s sense of place by employing the cultural capital associated with a foreign playwright to increase its own prestige within the town’s cultural-heritage landscape. Furthermore, by hosting highly experimental performances of Shakespeare from Hungary, Europe, and Asia, the Festival runs counter to the ethos of the town’s other leisure activities. After outlining the history of Shakespeare’s place within the Festival, I will discuss how a 2013 production of *Hamlet*, staged in the courtyard of the medieval castle, exemplifies the ways that Shakespeare can be made to play with and against this richly meaningful performance site. I will conclude by suggesting ways to think about such performance in relation Gyula’s identity as a tourist place.

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Respondent

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Shakespeare in an Urban Context

Given the kind of information I expect to be able to retrieve from Seattle Shakespeare Company, my paper will be primarily an historical overview of the history, mission statement, central personnel, production philosophy, and production history of SSC in Seattle. As opposed perhaps to the majority of the papers in this seminar, mine will probably be less theoretical and more practical, an investigation of how a truly classical, repertory theatre company began and sustains itself in a city with a lot of artistic competition.

I shall conclude with my review of what I consider one of SSC’s truly superb productions, its 2018 staging of *The Merchant of Venice*. This production brilliantly used Seattle itself as the play’s setting and illustrates the company’s embedded place in its home town.

The principal sources I will use are notes from former artistic directors and interviews from some of the founding members of the company.

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**GRASSROOTS SHAKESPEARE:
Amateur Shakespeare Performances in American Communities**

Shakespearean performance has played a role in the lives of Americans regardless of occupation, class, or level of education for centuries. From early amateur performances in colonial taverns to performances in women’s clubs in the late 1800s, and finally to the veritable explosion of festivals in the 1950s, Shakespeare has been a cornerstone of American theatrics. Very often because these festivals were a product of particular area the productions would take on unique regional characteristics. This phenomenon continues today; in the United States there are over three-hundred performance organizations dedicated to actively producing the works of William Shakespeare. These groups are comprised of a diverse selection of organizational models, philosophies, and community relationships. They not only provide entertainment and artistic opportunity, but often are woven into the social fabric of the local communities in which they serve. Well over one-third of the aforementioned Shakespeare performance organizations are not professionally trained or compensated, but rather are comprised of anyone with interest in participating. These amateur, or grassroots, organizations hail from all corners of the country. From urban groups in the nation’s largest cities to a company in rural Fairfield, Maine, these community efforts provide some of the only contact with Shakespeare many in their respective regions will ever experience. In this paper, three distinctly different performing organizations will be discussed: a grassroots organization from Maine (the Recycled Shakespeare Company), a hybrid company combining grassroots and professional qualities (Advice to the Players of Sandwich New Hampshire), and the professional Shakespeare company with grassroots origins (the Baltimore Shakespeare Factory). These organizations are thriving in America, unencumbered by geography and any number of challenges. The people who produce this art come from all walks of life, and they are vibrant and brimming with enthusiasm for Shakespeare.