

## Floating Hearts and Coronets: Virtual Immediacy in the SF Shakes *King Lear*

by Kevin A. Quarmby. Published in 2020 Issue 1.

For the production: *King Lear* (2020, San Francisco Shakespeare Festival). Performance attended 2020-07-26. See production details at the end of the review.

[SAN FRANCISCO SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL'S 2020 PRODUCTION OF KING LEAR](#) WAS FORCED TO abandon its free open-air performance format in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because rehearsal and performance of any in-person theatre was terminally compromised, SF Shakes (as it references itself) decided on a radical move away from the company's verdant park locations — in Cupertino, Redwood City, and Presidio and McLaren Parks in San Francisco — opting instead for a digital performance beamed live onto the computer screens of its homebound audience.



Figure 1. Technical Director Neal Ormond composites individual live performances of actors into a unified background for San Francisco Shakespeare Festival's 2020 "Free Shakespeare at Home" production of *King Lear*. Photo credit: San Francisco Shakespeare Festival.

With the click of a technical director's mouse, SF Shakes morphed into “Free Shakespeare at Home”. With “live” performances proving nigh impossible, SF Shakes was intent on bucking the arts-in-collapse trend.

Traditional reviews that record live performance events inevitably describe the venue, the theatrical setting, and the audience to paint a picture in the mind's eye prior to commenting on the actual play. Any review of a virtual production of *King Lear*, however, might rightly invite a resigned sigh of collective ennui about yet another Zoom conference-call experience, with two-dimensional blocks of talking heads trying frantically to reproduce dramatic intensity while sitting or standing in front of isolated, far-distanced micro-cameras and dodgy micro-microphones. With this *King Lear*, nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, innovative technological wizardry created a dramatic realm in which a King spiraled into mental decay while conniving upstarts plotted and tortured their way to short-lived power. Gone were the talking head Hollywood Squares block delivery method. In its place, a live filmicly animated group performance space was conjured that allowed multiple scene changes and stunning dramatic effects that furthered the narrative in the most gripping way. Three hours of theatre, including a fully thunderous intermission, lay in store for the play's enthusiastic audience.

The act of describing a performance like this requires us first to appreciate the technical innovation that made it possible. Tasked with creating this alternative theatrical experience, the company's Technical/Scenic/Graphic Designer Neal Ormond chose a combination of technologies — Zoom, Open Broadcaster Software, and YouTube — as the safest, most effective way to deliver the play to its real-time onlookers. These combined technologies allowed Ormond to “mix” the individual camera feeds of the isolated actors, all performing in front of home-mounted green screens, to construct a variety of visual locations populated by multiple

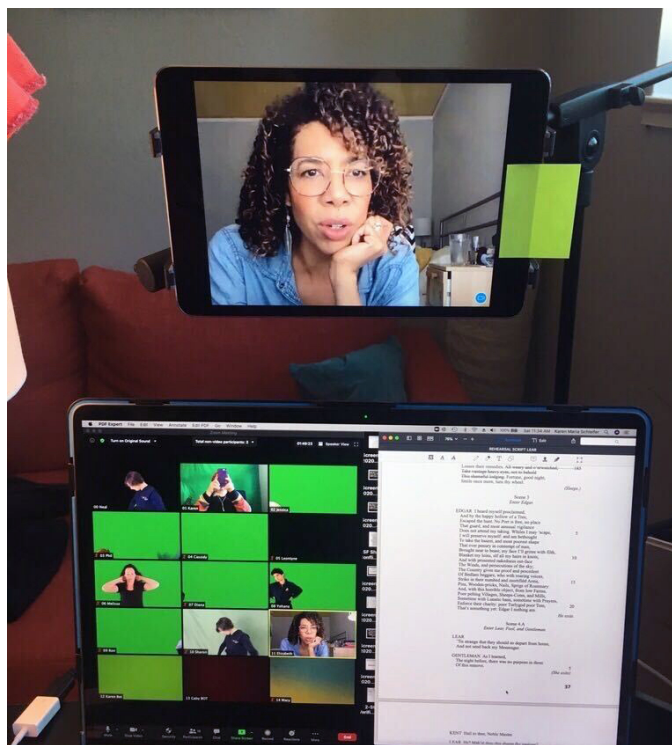


Figure 2. Elizabeth Carter directing *King Lear* using a combination of Zoom and OBS technology. Photo credit: San Francisco Shakespeare Festival.



performers who interacted with each other against those photographic backdrops that best suited the narratives of their respective scenes.

The actors could not see each other, but instead recreated their roles at each performance secure in the theatrical knowledge that hitting their actors' marks was as vital as if they were together onstage, constrained to and confined by their lighting cue locational diktats. What emerged with the SF Shakes *King Lear* was a production of dramatic merit and strength that made the virtual theatrical event come alive on home computer screens, not as a pre-recorded film, nor as a live broadcast multi-camera extravaganza, but as a socially distanced, socially responsible opportunity for professionals and creatives to explore their craft "without compromising" their "welfare and health" by recourse to dangerously collaborative in-person interaction (Quarmby 96). The dissemination of the play via YouTube also allowed for live "Chat" questions, comments, and responses to be passed back and forth between the audience and the production personnel, with information about performance choices and snippets of textual nuance shared, also in real-time.



Figure 3. Ron Chapman as Edmund delivering his "Why Bastard?" soliloquy to camera, after listening to a Black Lives Matter news report on his cellphone. Photo credit: San Francisco Shakespeare Festival.

Directed by Elizabeth Carter and presented in contemporary dress, the SF Shakes *King Lear* offered a production that seemingly relished its socio-topicality. Such contemporaneity was foregrounded from the opening scene, where Edmund (Ron Chapman) was discovered engrossed in the latest Black Lives Matter protest news report playing tinnily over his cellphone.

This overt reference to contemporary political discord, very much in the audience's hearts and minds throughout the production's ten week run, achieved its overall aesthetic traction from a decision made by Carter, and explained in the company "Chat" function. Long before the events of 2020, Carter had elected to cast her production with the older characters performed by white actors, while the younger characters were all people of color. Although metaphorical in original intent, Carter's casting acquired an elevated poignancy following the horrific murder of George Floyd. Topicality and diversity were key to this community theatre production that aimed to increase its access to as broad an audience as possible, while guaranteeing that Shakespeare could be seen to belong to all peoples regardless of their cultural, financial, or educational backgrounds.



Figure 4. Cassidy Brown as the disguised Earl of Kent confronting David Everett Moore's Oswald, observed by Melissa Ortiz (Regan), Gabriella Grier (Cornwall), and Phil Lowery (Gloucester). Photo credit: San Francisco Shakespeare Festival.

Although the play began with the closeup image of Chapman's Edmund, a first hint of the technological complexity of the production came when Phil Lowery's Earl of Gloucester and Cassidy Brown's Earl of Kent (who later donned a beanie and adopted a rural twang when in disguise) entered the scene and discussed Edmund's illegitimacy. With Chapman in the "downstage" position, able to offer sideways glances to his camera in response to his father's less than flattering description of his conception, the full power of this performance model became clear. Despite our intellectual awareness that these actors could not actually see each other, it soon became evident that such matters were no longer relevant to enjoying a live Shakespeare play in virtual performance. The actors moved and conversed within a single dramatic space,



their interactions captured by their respective cameras and externally (and invisibly) repopulated on the play's YouTube audience screens.

A scenic shift from generic high-status anteroom to identifiable Oval Office left the audience in no doubt about Carter's opinion of the incumbent White House occupant. Such simplistic political posturing was forgotten when nation's king entered, with Jessica Powell playing a powerful regendered Lear. Regendering best applies to this casting choice, since although Powell's Lear retained the "King" title, other actors referenced her as "mother" and "she/her" whenever the text required such alteration. Standing in front of a map of the USA, divided into three equal parts and ready for distributing to her daughters, Powell's Lear commanded the screen, the actor's forceful characterization perfectly suited to the role. Strength was indeed the most evident aspect of Powell's superlative performance, that and the strength with which Shakespeare's language truly emerged from the computer and laptop speakers of the play's audience, a factor that was regularly commented on in the YouTube "Chat" function, the comments streaming as real-time commentary alongside the action.



Figure 5. Yohana Ansari-Thomas in Edgar's "Poor Tom" guise watching Jessica Powell's Lear clutch at her crown of flowering weeds, as Phil Lowery's blinded Gloucester recognizes his king's voice. Photo credit: San Francisco Shakespeare Festival).

With Powell offering a Lear of great integrity and humanity it is not surprising that her daughters appeared well-rounded and humanized figures within a narrative that traditionally presents these siblings as little more than ciphers. Leontyne Mbele-Mbong's Goneril and Melissa Ortiz's Regan successfully navigated the court of their mother, their sycophancy and inevitable

powerplays perfectly suited to the virtual medium that noticed each sideways glance, each wince of recognition as their sovereign parent's irrational behavior got progressively worse. Accompanied by their dutiful spouses, whether the Duke of Albany of David Everett Moore or the Duke of Cornwall of Sharon Huff (replaced later in the run by Gabriella Grier), Goneril and Regan

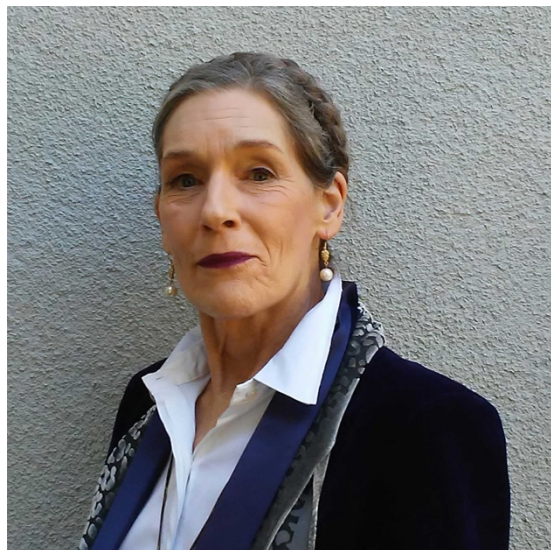


Figure 6. Pre-production promotional image of Jessica Powell as King Lear. Photo credit: San Francisco Shakespeare Festival.

earned the wrath of their mother with every selfish act they mustered. If one technical observation need be made at this stage, it is that Zoom technology is perfectly suited to isolating the full-on face from its background. When turned in profile, the actors' features — their noses and chins most noticeably — became strangely "flattened" and indistinct. A minor problem that, as technology improves, will undoubtedly change, but one which required us to adjust to a less than perfect visual experience, reminiscent of the grainy VHS recordings of old.

It was left to Cordelia, played with innocent charm by Diana Lauren Jones, to engage fully with the online audience, her profiled facial

expressions most often foregrounded (and thus more clearly defined) to invite intimate identification with her pain and, towards her sisters, utter disdain. As Cordelia, Lauren Jones was dutiful and willful, though her character changed dramatically when appearing in her alternative role as Lear's streetwise youthful Fool, resplendent in her Valentino knock-off multi-colored camouflage jacket. Interestingly, the costume designs of Hyun Sook Kim ensured that when Lauren Jones later returned in her Queen Cordelia role, her physical appearance in the serried ranks of French military tents echoed her Fool persona. Cordelia, like the Fool, was again dressed in a military camouflage gear, though this time minus its outlandish motley colors. A difficult moment of dramatic intensity inevitably was the final entry of Lear with her daughter's body, the action created by close-up images of the distraught parent and a slow and erratic swiping across the screen of a shrouded body, its movement suggesting Lear, with some difficulty, had dragged Cordelia's lifeless corpse into the scene.

If the strength of reconciliation between Powell's Lear and Lauren Jones's Cordelia seemed powerfully, and surprisingly effectively, evoked despite the real versus virtual distances between the two actors, then this success was matched by the heightened level of malevolence this format offered Chapman's Edmund. In turn, Yohana Ansari-Thomas's Edgar likewise found new levels



of engagement with the audience through the intimacy of the live screen. When first we met Edgar, distracted by earbud music as he read a book, we were struck by the youthful innocence of the character. Later, as Poor Tom, Edgar embraced the wildness of his disguise choice while also demonstrating his humanity as he cared for his blinded father. As an example of theatricality made possible by technology, Edgar and Edmund even succeed in creating a virtual knife (rather than sword) fight, the challengers seemingly circling and threatening each other with all the power of a *West Side Story* Shark/Jet tragic rumble. Disguised from his brother's gaze by a ninja-like outfit, Edgar attacked with a ferocity that inevitably led to Edmund succumbing to his lunging attacks. That the real distance between the actors could be measured in miles, rather than close-combat feet or yards, was testament to the powerful illusion a virtual socially distanced performance model could achieve.

Similar moments of adjusted theatricality emerged in the blinding of Gloucester. Although the audience was led initially to believe this would be presented with voyeuristic horror-flick gore, Carter offered instead a duke's eyes view of the proceedings. Instead of watching despicable deeds committed against Lowery's Gloucester, we, the audience, became Gloucester, seeing and then not seeing in bloody agony. In another regendered casting choice, Huff (later replaced by Grier) played a psychopathic Duke of Cornwall, her slick hair and masculinized appearance complementing perfectly the cold malice of her and her wife's attack against a defenseless old man. While Cornwall taunted her victim, staring straight into the camera at us, the audience, we watched through Gloucester's eyes as one by one they were ripped from "our" heads. The moment of sight loss was achieved dramatically by a slow descending cloud of red blood that first obscured half our "sight," then smothered the entire vision, leaving a blank nothing as the reddened image faded to a black screen. Surprisingly effective in its visual representation of blinding, this theatrical effect ensured that actors could be heard but not seen as the immediate aftermath unfolded. As



Figure 7. Phil Lowery as Gloucester performs from home in front of a green screen, his image composited in real time onto a unified background with other cast members. Photo credit: San Francisco Shakespeare Festival.

audience members, we became Gloucester the blinded aristocrat, an experience at once disturbing and illuminating in its unilluminated intensity.

The SF Shakes company, under the direction of Carter and the technological control of Ormond, had created an evening's live entertainment that stretched the boundaries of theatrical innovation in this COVID-19 restricted world. Presented with a *King Lear* that did not shy from its topical roots in contemporary American society and employing technology of such groundbreaking originality that it earned as much of a curtain call as the play's actors, the SF Shakes audience were treated to a living, breathing performance that made Shakespeare come alive when so much around us is, unfortunately and horrifically, dying. The curtain call was indeed a revelation as Ormond flicked a virtual switch to show the thirteen company actors in their individual Zoom green screens. Canned applause might assist the sense of opening night fun, but the image of multiple YouTube "hearts" floating up a screen was testament to how brave this venture was at a time when performance of anything, especially in the theatre, needed to consider the safety of all concerned. Floating hearts might be 2020's answer to the standing ovation. The SF Shakes *King Lear* deserved every one of them.

## References

Quarmby, Kevin A. "PPE for Shakespearians: Pandemic, Performance and Education." *Shakespeare Survey* 74 (2021): 81–97.

## Links

San Francisco Shakespeare Festival. <http://www.sfshakes.org/>

Free Shakespeare at Home — reflections on summer 2020.

<http://www.sfshakes.org/performances/free-shakespeare-at-home-reflections-on-summer-2020>



## Production Details

### General

<i>Title</i>	<i>King Lear</i>
<i>Year</i>	2020
<i>Theatre Company</i>	San Francisco Shakespeare Festival
<i>Theatre</i>	Virtual via YouTube
<i>Start Date</i>	July 18, 2020
<i>End Date</i>	September 27, 2020

### Cast

KING LEAR	JESSICA POWELL
EARL OF GLOUCESTER	PHIL LOWERY
GONERIL	LEONTYNE MBELE-MBONG
REGAN	MELISSA ORTIZ
CORDELIA/THE FOOL	DIANA LAUREN JONES
EARL OF KENT	CASSIDY BROWN
EDMUND/DUKE OF BURGUNDY	RON CHAPMAN
EDGAR/KING OF FRANCE	YOHANA ANSARI-THOMAS
DUKE OF ALBANY/OSWALD	DAVID EVERETT MOORE
DUKE OF CORNWALL/LEAR'S ATTENDANT	SHARON HUFF/GABRIELLA GRIER
CURAN	EVAN LUCERO
ATTENDANT 1/SERVANT 2/FRENCH SOLDIER/HERALD	VIV HELVAJIAN
ATTENDANT 2/SERVANT 1/FRENCH SOLDIER/CAPTAIN	HILARY BUFFUM

### Creatives

DIRECTOR	ELIZABETH CARTER
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR	REBECCA J. ENNALS
FIGHT DIRECTOR	SYDNEY SCHWINDT
TECHNICAL DIRECTOR/SCENIC/GRAPHIC DESIGNER	NEAL ORMOND
COSTUME DESIGNER	HYUN SOOK KIM
HAIR & MAKEUP DESIGNER	AMELIA VAN BRUNT
LIGHTING DESIGNER	JOHN BERNARD
SOUND DESIGNER/COMPOSER	LANA PALMER
PRODUCTION MANAGER	PRATIKSHA SHAH
PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER	KAREN SCHLEIFER

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER

GREEN SHOW WRITER/DIRECTOR

LITERARY INTERNS

STAGE MANAGEMENT INTERNS

GABRIELLA HOWELL

CHRISTIAN HAINES

ELIANA LEWIS-EME, GRACE NELLIGAN, ARIN ROBERSON

SARAH ORTTUNG, MACY TAYLOR