



## Editorial

### Little did we know!

by Kevin A. Quarmby. Published in 2019 Issue 1.

ANY EDITORIAL COMMENTARY ABOUT 2019'S THEATRICAL SCENE, WHEN WRITTEN IN HINDSIGHT, SEEMS doomed from the start. Not only did 2019 pass with all its political, social, and cultural discord painfully intact, but also the year's focus on disparate, often localized events now appears quaintly ill-considered given the global problems that erupted in 2020. It is hard to imagine, in the socially-distanced bunkerdom that engulfs theatrical production worldwide—at least for the foreseeable future—that there even was a theatrical scene, especially one that employed actors, directors, designers, and musicians gainfully and creatively. International live theatre did, however, exist. The varied articles in *Scene's* 2019 edition confirm that. What follows, therefore, is a journey through a select few theatrical enterprises, a journey that offers a taste of what was, a reminder what we now miss, and hope for what soon will return.

Most noticeable about the reviews published in 2019 is how varied their engagement with social issues that, at the time, provided the thematic focus for so many theatrical ventures. Whether referencing social exclusion, invasive populism, sexual harassment, issues of gender identity and parity, agism, ableism, or bullying, the productions described by *Scene* reviewers demonstrate the willingness and desire of theatre creatives to explore subjects that some found uncomfortable, but which many recognized as of fundamental significance in the fractured world in which we lived. No matter which side of the political spectrum one resides, it remains difficult to view 2019 as anything but another polarized and polarizing year. Theatre was not blind to such polarization. Neither was theatre unwilling to confront it head-on. As we shall see, however, one specific aspect of societal concern seemed *not* to be addressed in the productions this 2019 edition focuses on, a concern that, again in hindsight, is indicative of where 2020 was yet to lead us. More of that, however, later.

First to be considered from an ableist perspective was the [Seattle-based A Contemporary Theatre's \*Romeo and Juliet\*](#), their version following other recent casting decisions in the US and UK in employing two deaf actors, one playing Romeo and one Friar Lawrence. With ASL (American Sign Language) reportedly the fourth most-popular US language, embraced, as [Tamar Lewin noted](#), by colleges and universities as a professionally useful alternative to certain European language-requirement counterparts, its manifestation in Shakespearean performance seems

both understandable and inevitable. As Michael Shurgot's review suggests, ACT's *Romeo and Juliet* used its deaf ASL-conversing actors as metaphorical signifiers for the inability of Verona's older generation to understand its youth. Shurgot notes, however, that the creative decision to offer onstage "voiced" interpretations of these significant ASL moments—tantamount to providing spoken subtitling by non-deaf actors for the play's hearing-culture audience—had a profound, potentially negative impact on the play's inclusivity, as well as audience appreciation of ASL's cultural appropriateness, significance, and communicative beauty in a dramatic context.

While a Seattle production of *Romeo and Juliet* explored the play's ASL potential, across the country in Atlanta a wholly different communication tool informed [Magnificent Bastard's "Shit-faced Shakespeare"](#) version of the star-crossed lovers' tragedy. As Dan Mills describes, this imported UK production relied on the self-inflicted para-ability of its principal Romeo, apparently required to consume vast quantities of alcohol in preparation for each performance. This foreshortened, oft-improvised version of the famous narrative, filled with drunken off-the-cuff audience rebuffs and cursing populist malice, leads Mills to consider the role of Shakespeare as a high-brow/low-brow cultural phenomenon, while questioning what such irreverent, though obviously (for many) enjoyable theatrical shenanigans might say about American and British attitudes to the Shakespeare canon, especially among those less used to venerating its hallowed dramatic texts.

Irreverence might be the kindest description of the "Shit-faced Shakespeare" experience, though Niamh O'Leary takes greater issue with the rigidly-imposed reverence of the [Cincinnati Shakespeare Company's \*The Winter's Tale\*](#). Citing the "park and bark" style of acting imported from the UK, along with the play's director, and employed with questionable success by the Cincy Shakes actors, O'Leary notes how relevant a production's lighting and sound designs become when mood and emotion are stripped from those for whom physicalizing and naturalistic embodiment traditionally are key. Most noticeable, however, seems this version's attempt to equate Hermione's trial plight to the #MeToo movement's elevated 2019 political voice and impact. For O'Leary, such overt and understandable foregrounding of contemporary political discourse nonetheless impacts the play's resolution in surprisingly problematic ways.

Imported acting styles are the least of the problems suffered by the cast of [Cheek by Jowl's \*The Knight of the Burning Pestle\*](#), a touring production performed in Russian by Russian actors that visited the UK capital London in the summer of 2019. For the "official" acting personnel, intent on performing their "avant garde Eurasia-angst" production uninterrupted, the arrival onstage of the Grocer and the Grocer's Wife, as well as the theatrically inept Rafe, demonstrated the power of populism in determining and restricting their professional creative freedoms. My own review of this production equates the recent interviews with Vladimir Putin—in which the

Russian President discusses his belief in the inevitable collapse of liberal democracies through an over-adherence to multiculturalist policies—with this Brexit-spattered romp through destructive populism. Most affected by such populist interventions seem the actors, whose powerlessness to deny their audiences' political and cultural whims highlight the inability of creatives worldwide truly to escape forces that ultimately dictate their failures or successes.

Not prey to outside metadramatic forces but to the actorly “pack” of wolves that harass the arrogant upstart, the pompous steward Malvolio is central to the performance analysis of Stephanie Collins. As an actor in the UK-based [Stamford Shakespeare Company production of \*Twelfth Night\*](#) performed over two summer months at the Rutland Open Air Theatre, Collins is perfectly situated to discuss the creative choices and nightly outcomes of a version that liberally regendered a selection of roles, while resituating the drama in a fanciful nineteenth-century Balkan state. With her examination of the pitfalls associated with naturalistic readings of certain comic scenes involving Malvolio and his tormentors, the casting of a teenage Feste clown, as well as her consideration of the production's radical “gender-bending” of a well-known play for its predominantly “conservative” small-county Rutland audience, Collins provides an insider actor's view that is both refreshingly informative and unsentimentally critical.

If a diminutive English county was exposed to the teenage shenanigans of an Illyrian clown, the [Greater Victoria Shakespeare Festival's \*Julius Caesar\*](#) offered its Canadian audience far more by way of youthful performers with their 2019 open-air production. Respectively seen three weeks apart by reviewers Erin E. Kelly and Janelle Jenstad, GVSF's modern-dress, mixed-gender *Julius Caesar*, while undoubtedly complex and ambitious, prompted a fundamental question from these reviewing collaborators: “what happens when you stage this mature play with a very young cast?” While celebrating the ambition of this British Columbian experiment, whereby one surprising element of the play received a dramatic boost from the physical energy of its young actors, Kelly and Jenstad offer incisive commentary on the potentiality and pitfalls of certain innovative creative choices that impacted the play's core effectiveness.

Returning to the UK, and an open-air production at Cardiff Castle, P. B. Roberts describes the all-male [Lord Chamberlain's Men touring production of \*A Midsummer Night's Dream\*](#), alongside company claims for ultimate “authenticity.” With its limited seven-strong cast, the LCM production seemingly reveled in the homoerotic potential of its “gossamer clowning” over-sexed male-fairy world, while also portraying its female characters with a naturalism that successfully countered the “disconcerting whiff of homophobia” that accompanied earlier productions by the troupe. The elevation of the sexual, Roberts suggests, had a profound and surprising impact on the *Pyramus and Thisbe* play-within-a-play, however, and one which other “authentic” production houses should note with caution.

Authenticity was never the intent of the Vancouver-based [Bard on the Beach production of \*The Taming of the Shrew\*](#), unless, that is, one views Hollywoodized Wild West romantic comedies as authentic evocations of nineteenth-century American culture. As Meredith Beales discusses, the relocation of this *Shrew* to the gun-toting West makes for an interesting rereading of the Katherine character, made even more sympathetic by her mistreatment at the hands of local townsfolk. The specificity with which the comedy Western world informs the eventual transformation of Katherine, and her surprisingly successful revenge against those who seemingly spent years bullying her, adds its own topicality to this uncomfortably nuanced play. A “satire of sexism” or “simply a straight-up sexist play”? Beales finds this Canadian production’s creative choices unusually informative, albeit within the confines of an ultimately troubling drama.

In the Production Notice section, the regendered performances of [The Tempest and The Merchant of Venice by Calgary’s The Shakespeare Company](#) are discussed by Cliff Werier. While Werier notes the regendering of Prospera and Shylock in passing, the overarching concerns he expresses have nothing to do with such casting choices. Instead, Werier highlights the importance of actorly quality and technique, along with maturity and experience, as far greater indicators of creative success or failure.

Finally, Michelle LaFlamme’s Production Notice of the [Bard on the Beach production of \*Shakespeare in Love\*](#) offers a celebratory description of the “performativity of gender” in this “re-historicized” romp into Will Shakespeare’s writing career. With the play’s fictional representation of Shakespeare’s love—for his theatre and the young aristocrat who inspires his creativity—*Shakespeare in Love* demonstrates a cultural need for historical backstories that add human fallibility to Shakespeare’s character that both humanize and democratize in equal measure.

As this edition’s international selection of productions confirm, early modern theatrical performances in 2019 invariably addressed, to a greater or lesser extent, the social discourse of the time. Whether expressing concerns about populism, Trumpism and Brexit, or the #MeToo movement and bullying. Whether celebrating gender fluidity, the regendering of roles, or the quest for authenticity. Whether questioning youthful inexperience in performance or highlighting the inherent homophobia in certain performance practices. Any of the plays discussed over the course of 2019 explored one or more of these issues as part of their conscious attempts to remain topically immediate. As noted earlier, however, there is one social concern that the review selection does not seem to address, a concern that confirms the social divide between 2019 and 2020. Not, as you might have thought, COVID-19, but a far more dangerous

virus that has infected the world for centuries. The virus of racial inequity and prejudice. Read any of these reviews from 2019 and the question of race is conspicuous by its absence.

Of course, productions were being staged in 2019 that confronted racial concerns head-on. Such productions are not, unfortunately, considered in *Scene's* 2019 issue. It is not that there was any intention to deny the injustices. It is to admit that the productions reviewed indicate how such matters did not seem of immediate importance, or topical significance, for the production houses in the Americas and Europe attended by *Scene* representatives. In consequence, it is also necessary to remind ourselves how far our collective consciences have traveled over the subsequent months since 2019 came to a close. As the US's Actors' Equity Association states in its ["Diversity and Inclusion Retrofit"](#) manifesto of June 2020, while "systemic racism is present in all functions of our society, including the labor movement and the theater industry," the actors' union "recognizes the impact that systemic racism and white supremacy have had on its own structures, acknowledges its historic culpability in perpetuating inequity, and is committed to doing the work to untether itself from all forms of unjust action."

Systemic racism, white supremacy, and historic culpability might be difficult truths for us to acknowledge when eagerly awaiting a post-pandemic return to theatrical normalcy, but it behooves us to recognize how, for many of our fellow citizens, the opportunity to attend an early modern play and to consider its performative value is tainted by a fear for personal safety, the threat of racially-motivated violence, and a serious concern for the wellbeing of loved ones at the hands of those we invite to guard our fundamental human rights.

Let it be known, therefore, that *Scene: Reviews of Early Modern Drama*, like the [US actors' union](#) to which some of the performers referenced in its reviews belong, likewise "commits to considering all options to help move forward the cause of racial and economic justice."

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## Links

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