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“Because Survival is Insufficient”: Performing Virtual Shakespearean Tragedy in the Era of COVID-19

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Abstract

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and its ensuing lockdowns in 2020-2021, many theatre-makers turned to online platforms such as Zoom and YouTube to produce online theatrical performances in the absence of in-person theatre opportunities. Two such projects, Sofa Shakespeare and The Show Must Go Online, both produced a series of Shakespearean plays that were created and performed fully online, with participants and audience members from around the globe. The history of Shakespearean performance during mass disease outbreaks dates back to the era in which the plays were written, and this thesis argues that online Shakespearean works produced during COVID-19 continued a well-established tradition of Shakespearean performance during mass disease outbreaks, but also used technological advancements to create new ways of working within the constraints of lockdown, effectively facilitated audience engagement and interaction, and fostered online community spaces that allowed participants to find connections with one another during a time of mass isolation and tragedy. This thesis uses three case studies (Sofa Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, The Show Must Go Online's *Macbeth*, and both projects' respective versions of *Hamlet*) to examine the ways in which these projects used Shakespeare as a means of facilitating online community during a time of mass tragedy and isolation, the ways in which the online platform could be used to enhance the central themes of the work, and the impact of the remaining "virtual ghosts" of these works in the online archival space. Much as *Romeo and Juliet* unites people who have been isolated from one another, or as ghosts appear in *Hamlet* to connect the characters to the past, this thesis will demonstrate how Shakespearean performance during COVID-19 inspired connection and innovation across distances while also maintaining a link between pandemics past and present.

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Contents

1. Introduction and Literature Review.....	7
2. Chapter 1: Plagues Then and Now.....	35
3. Chapter 2: Crowdsourcing Community in Early Lockdown: <i>Sofa Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet</i>.....	53
4. Chapter 3: Sounds and the Supernatural in <i>The Show Must Go Online's Macbeth</i>.....	74
5. Chapter 4: <i>Hamlet's</i> Virtual Ghosts: Performing the Past, Engaging the Present, and Informing the Future.....	95
6. Conclusion.....	118
7. Bibliography.....	127

List of Illustrations

1. <i>J. Awdely, The Daunce and Song of Death (1569)</i>.....	41
Source: Awdely, J. <i>The Daunce and Song of Death</i> . 1569. Accessed via ProQuest, www.proquest.com/books/daunce-song-death/docview/2248557647/se-2?accountid=14404	
2. George Thomson, <i>Loimotomia, or, The pest anatomized (1666)</i>.....	42
Source: Thomson, George. <i>Loimotomia, or, The pest anatomized</i> . 1666. Accessed via ProQuest, https://www.proquest.com/docview/2240924741/12075699?sourcetype=Books	
3. Lady Macbeth's "Out, damned spot" speech used to demonstrate proper handwashing technique (2020).....	67
Source: Smith, Emma. "Out Damned Spot": the Lady Macbeth hand-washing scene that became a coronavirus meme." <i>Penguin Features</i> , 12 March 2020. https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2020/03/the-history-behind-the-lady-macbeth-coronavirus-meme	
4. Screenshot from <i>Sofa Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet</i>, Act IV, scene iii (2020).....	72
Source: Sofa Shakespeare. <i>Sofa Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet - Act IV scene iii</i> . Youtube. 24 March 2020. https://youtu.be/LhJYKCSL33	
5. Screenshot from <i>The Show Must Go Online's Macbeth</i>, Act I, scene i (2020).....	79
Source: Myles, Rob. <i>The Show Must Go Online: Macbeth</i> . YouTube. 7th October 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAAI_c65nZY&t=1435s	

6. Screenshot from *The Show Must Go Online's Hamlet, Act III, scene ii* (2020).....110
 Source: Myles, Rob. *The Show Must Go Online: Hamlet*. YouTube. 12th August 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/live/QIDkPcYdSG0?si=Su7LKRESLmo4-ZZy>
7. Screenshot from *Sofa Shakespeare's Hamlet, Act I, scene v* (2021).....117
 Source: Sofa Shakespeare. *Sofa Shakespeare: Hamlet - Act I scene v*. Youtube. 15 March 2021. <https://youtu.be/3klJyJPLSUo?si=layCJl-8ONvRjdOg>

Introduction and Literature Review

I. Shakespeare and Disease: An Introduction

The effect of COVID-19 on the global theatre industry was, to say the least, catastrophic. With many countries enforcing strict lockdown measures preventing large in-person gatherings, live theatre in its typical state was deemed impossible, and – as countless actors and theatre-makers undoubtedly remember vividly – many theatres were forced to close their doors or drastically change their operating procedures to accommodate these changes. During this time, online productions became a staple in both amateur and professional theatre communities, most commonly presented via YouTube or the videoconferencing platform Zoom. These productions covered a wide variety of genres ranging from traditional to experimental, but Shakespeare proved to be an especially popular choice. Two projects in particular, *The Show Must Go Online* and *Sofa Shakespeare*, used virtual Shakespearean theatre as a means of facilitating online community during times of widespread isolation, creating meaningful artistic works even in the face of global tragedy, and continuing the centuries-long tradition of performing Shakespearean theatre during mass disease outbreaks.

The connection between disease and Shakespearean theatre dates back to the plays' earliest performances. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries when the plays were written and first performed, London was repeatedly ravaged by outbreaks of disease – most notably the bubonic plague, which had two major outbreaks in London during Shakespeare's writing career in 1592-93 and 1603, as well as many smaller outbreaks in the years between.¹ Shakespeare would have personally witnessed the effects of the mass casualties caused by this deadly disease, and his company of players had to work around theatre closures and quarantines that were not dissimilar to those of the COVID-19 lockdowns. Although none of Shakespeare's plays are *about* disease in the sense that disease features as a central plot point, the frequent allusions and comparisons to illness (not just of the body but also of the mind, of the spirit, and of society) make it apparent that the topic weighed heavily on Shakespeare's mind as he was writing.

Even prior to the onset of COVID-19, the connections between Shakespeare and disease were prevalent in popular culture. Emily St. John Mandel's post-apocalyptic

¹ Leeds Barroll, *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare's Theater: The Stuart Years*. (Cornell University Press, 1991), ix.

novel *Station Eleven* is a testament to the cultural impact of the association between Shakespeare and mass disease outbreaks, and eerily foreshadowed the events that would occur just a few years later. The book features several intersecting storylines, all of which revolve around the Traveling Symphony: a group of actors and musicians who perform Shakespeare plays as a means of preserving their culture and humanity as they travel around the sparsely-populated and often dangerous wasteland that remains in the aftermath of a devastating disease that more than decimates the global population. Their world has been ravaged by the plague and day-to-day survival is not the near guarantee that it was for most people prior to the pandemic, but their main purpose is to provide what's left of humanity with more than just basic survival necessities: they seek to provide entertainment and interpersonal connection in a world where those things have become vanishingly rare. The group performs Shakespeare because their audiences prefer it and even seem to crave it: as one member of the Symphony puts it, "People want what was best about the world".² Their slogan—and the inspiration for the title of this thesis—is displayed prominently on the side of their lead caravan: "Because survival is insufficient".³

First published in 2014, *Station Eleven* predates the onset of COVID-19 by around six years. At the time of its publication, the most recent pandemic of a scale anywhere near that of COVID-19 was the Great Influenza of 1918-1920 nearly a century prior, so there was little frame of reference for what Shakespearean performance might look like in a twenty-first-century pandemic. However, the connections between Shakespeare and mass disease outbreaks are clear even in the absence (at the time of publication) of a contemporary real-world example. One character in the novel justifies the existence of the Traveling Symphony by arguing that "Shakespeare had lived in a plague-ridden society with no electricity and so did the Traveling Symphony",⁴ implying that Shakespeare's works tend to resonate with audiences in times of mass disease outbreaks. Another character has a different view, saying that "In Shakespeare's time the wonders of technology were still ahead, not behind them, and far less had been lost",⁵ which suggests that performing the plays to a contemporary audience ignores the centuries of history that have taken place in between the play's publication and now (or at least the "now" of

² Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven* (Penguin Random House, 2014), 38.

³ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 288.

Station Eleven's mostly-destroyed world). The projects discussed in this thesis, I argue, demonstrate both of these points simultaneously. The high volume of participants and viewers of both *The Show Must Go Online* and *Sofa Shakespeare* does suggest that Shakespeare's works resonated with audiences during lockdown—or at least, they resonated enough for people to participate willingly and enthusiastically. Shakespeare also had a historical relevance, given the fact that the plays were written during a time when the bubonic plague was a constant threat to survival. This idea is illustrated in a conversation between two members of the Symphony, Kirsten and Dieter:

She remembered Dieter talking to her about Shakespeare, Shakespeare's works and family, Shakespeare's plague-haunted life. 'Wait, do you mean he had the plague?' she asked. 'No,' Dieter said, 'I mean he was defined by it. I don't know how much schooling you've had. Do you know what that means, to be defined by something?'⁶

Like Shakespeare, the members of the Symphony had their fates defined by the trajectory of a virus, and could form a connection to his works despite the lack of historical resources available to them. Kirsten also has a more personal connection to the material: she was a child actress in a production of *King Lear* in the weeks leading up to the pandemic's sudden onset. Regardless of the rationale, the story demonstrates that Shakespeare's works can serve as both a pleasant distraction from life's circumstances and a connection to people's memories of society before the collapse.

There is an elegance in the enduring connection between Shakespeare and disease, given the fact that so much of his work was written while he himself was living in the midst of a plague outbreak. The opening chapter of *Station Eleven* describes a production of one such work, *King Lear*. The fact that *Lear* was written during a plague outbreak is never mentioned in the novel, and the play doesn't feature disease as a central plot point, but parallels can nevertheless be drawn between the two stories. Edgar, for example, spends much of the play living in seclusion, as did many people in Shakespeare's London during plague outbreaks. Cordelia is sent away from her family to live in a country she doesn't recognize, much like the characters in *Station Eleven* are sent out into an unfamiliar world in the wake of the Georgia Flu. *King Lear* is isolated from the rest of the

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

world not by disease or by distance, but by madness. In Act II, scene iv, Lear says that “Infirmity doth still neglect all office / Whereto our health is bound. We are not ourselves / When nature, being oppressed, commands the mind / To suffer with the body”⁷ – citing disease’s overpowering impact on one’s mental and physical state alike, and its ability to override all other aspects of life. It is fitting, then, that the first character to die in *Station Eleven* did so while playing Lear.

Station Eleven is not one of the primary works discussed in this thesis; however, it clearly illustrates society’s fascination with the connection between Shakespeare and mass illness outbreaks. Even prior to the onset of COVID-19, it was apparent that Shakespeare resonates with people during these times, and that Shakespearean theatre can be used to provide comfort, community, and a creative outlet during particularly harrowing periods of widespread disease and the accompanying fear and uncertainty. The prevalence of Shakespeare and disease in popular culture was a crucial precedent to the events of 2020 and 2021, and works such as *Station Eleven* set the stage for the transition of Shakespearean works into a socially-distanced, pandemic-inspired setting – as was the case during the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. This thesis will focus on two such projects, both of which used Shakespearean theatre as a means of creating and cultivating online communities during a time of mass isolation and tragedy, devising new strategies of working within a fully-online rehearsal and performance space, and creating digital footprints or “virtual ghosts” that will continue to remain in the online space even in the aftermath of lockdown.

II. Overview and Structure

This thesis will primarily focus on two long-term virtual theatre projects that were created and executed during the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020-2021. The first is Sofa Shakespeare, created by California-based actor Julia Giolzetti. Sofa Shakespeare uses what Benjamin Broadribb describes as a “crowdsourced”⁸ model for producing Shakespeare, in which entire plays are divided into one-minute segments, with each segment assigned to a different actor or group of actors. Each participant was invited to film their assigned segment of the play, taking whatever creative liberties they wish as

⁷ William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (Arden Shakespeare Third Series), ed. R.A. Foakes (Bloomsbury, 1997), II.iv.105-107.

⁸ Benjamin Broadribb, “Lockdown Shakespeare and the Metamodern Sensibility,” in *Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation*, eds. Gemma Kate Allred, Benjamin Broadribb, and Erin Sullivan (Bloomsbury, 2021), 49.

long as the text is incorporated somehow—whether it’s spoken, sung, displayed in writing on the screen, or even translated into another language. (Although many of the clips featured participants’ living rooms and sofas as the name implies, that was by no means a requirement.) The video clips are then edited together, in the order they appear in the script, to produce a patchwork representation of the play. The final product can (as Broadribb notes⁹) be somewhat difficult to follow in terms of plot due to the minute-to-minute changes in cast, format, and production style, but the overall effect is one of unity and collective storytelling. By providing glimpses into people’s homes and lives during lockdown, the project created a visual representation of the era and the need for creative outlets during that time.

The second project that this thesis will focus on is *The Show Must Go Online*, created by Rob Myles and Sarah Peachey and directed by Myles. Unlike *Sofa Shakespeare*, *The Show Must Go Online* produced every known Shakespeare play, in the order that they were believed to have been written. Over a period of nine months spanning from March through November of 2020, the project produced a play every week—including casting, rehearsals, and final performance—entirely via Zoom and YouTube. By the end of its run, the project had produced a total of forty plays: the complete First Folio catalogue, plus four contemporary Shakespearean adaptations written by Ian Doescher.¹⁰ The project placed an emphasis on diversity and inclusiveness, featuring actors from around the world and basing casting decisions on allowing the largest number of people possible to participate: as with *Sofa Shakespeare*, there was no formal audition process, and potential participants instead filled out a Google Form to express their interest and give the organisers a sense of their experience and availability. Although many of the cast members (roughly two thirds of those cast¹¹) were professional actors and/or drama school graduates, prior experience was not the only factor in casting decisions; rather, priority was given to those who had previously applied and been unsuccessful: applications were ranked according to “who had applied most and been cast least”.¹² (That said, some actors did appear in more than one show. For example, actor Maryam Grace is featured prominently in both of the *The Show Must Go Online*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁰ Rob Myles. “The Show Must Go Online,” Rob Myles, accessed 29 July 2025, <https://robmyles.co.uk/theshowmustgoonline/>

¹¹ Rob Myles and Valerie Clayman Pye, *Innovation and Digital Theatremaking: Rethinking Theatre with The Show Must Go Online* (Routledge, 2024), 83.

¹² *Ibid.*, 49.

productions discussed in this thesis, playing the title role in *Macbeth* and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*.) There was also a conscious effort to feature actors from a diverse set of backgrounds. Sydney Aldridge, the project's casting director from *Henry VI Part II* onward, states that the production team changed the genders of many roles in the interest of equity. Sometimes the team deliberately sought out female and nonbinary actors for roles originally written as male (as was the case for their production of *Macbeth*), but for most shows, they made all roles open to anyone of any gender. The production team knew the genders of actors who applied, and therefore couldn't use a truly gender-blind casting strategy, but when they did take gender into account it was with the goal of maximizing inclusion within a body of work whose characters traditionally skew heavily male. Aldridge also states that "We then sought to maximize the inclusion of people of color, disabled people/people with disabilities, those with access needs, as well as those with specific identities applicable to the play in question" (for instance, ensuring that Jewish actors were well represented in the cast of *The Merchant of Venice*).¹³ As with gender, actors had to self-disclose whether or not they belonged to any marginalised demographics – but that information was used for the purpose of subverting cultural norms around who traditionally "belongs" in a Shakespearean cast.

For the purposes of this thesis, I have organised my research into four chapters. The first will contextualise the works discussed in later chapters by comparing COVID-19 to the bubonic plague outbreaks of Shakespeare's day, both in terms of the diseases themselves and their respective impacts on theatre and popular culture. The bubonic plague was the start of a centuries-long history of Shakespearean performance during mass disease outbreaks, and the first chapter will demonstrate the differences – and, more crucially, the parallels – between diseases in Shakespeare's day and COVID-19. The chapter will also discuss the relationships between disease and morality with respect to both Shakespeare's era and today, how those perceptions of morality appear in Shakespeare's writing as well as other early modern writings, and how our modern understanding of disease and shame impacts how those works translate to the contemporary stage. Furthermore, the chapter will examine the respective "visibility" of both diseases, in terms of both their symptoms and the likelihood of an uninfected person witnessing the diseases' serious complications or end stages. The bubonic plague typically presented with very visible sores on the victim's skin, and those infected

¹³ *Ibid.*, 83.

typically died in their homes with families present, whereas COVID-19's symptoms do not tend to cause physical disfigurement and deaths typically occurred behind closed doors. These factors, I argue, have had a demonstrated impact on how both illnesses were and continue to be depicted and discussed in popular culture.

The next three chapters will consist of case studies, each focusing on a different Shakespearean tragedy. I will begin with Sofa Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, with a focus on the online communities that formed around the project and how the exceptionally collaborative nature of the work contributed to the overall sense of interpersonal connection afforded by virtual theatre in times of isolation. Because Sofa Shakespeare's format necessitated a high volume of participants, the project was able to generate a diverse community of actors and theatre-makers from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, geographic locations, artistic styles, and experiences with Shakespeare. Although the participants did not have to interact directly with one another since their individual segments were filmed separately, the work and the audience's engagement with the work provided a snapshot into the earliest days of lockdown, and how theatre can be used to connect people during especially trying and isolating conditions. Because *Romeo and Juliet* was conceptualised and performed in the earliest days of lockdown (created just days after Giolzetti's home state of California issued its first shelter-in-place order), the project was created without the (conscious or unconscious) influence of other similar works produced during this time.

The second case study will focus on The Show Must Go Online's *Macbeth*, with an emphasis on the how the project's participants were able to use the virtual platform to create audiovisual effects (specifically sound design and visual illusion) that enhanced the supernatural elements of the play as well as the overarching sense of unease and political turmoil that characterise the play (as well as the sociopolitical climate during lockdown). Although using Zoom as a performance space is often viewed as a limitation, this chapter will demonstrate the ways in which The Show Must Go Online was able to use the platform to enhance the viewer's experience rather than limit it. This chapter will also compare The Show Must Go Online's use of audiovisual effects to those of other adaptations of the play, including Punchdrunk Productions' *Sleep No More* (2011-2024), Past is Prologue Productions' and the Filigree Theatre's *Shakespeare in the Dark: Macbeth* (2018), and the Donmar Warehouse's *Macbeth* (2023-2024). The chapter will place an emphasis on the use of multisensory elements in adaptations of *Macbeth* and how those elements can lend themselves particularly well to the virtual space, and how

The Show Must Go Online continues this tradition through the use of a fully online platform.

The final case study will be an examination of both Sofa Shakespeare's and The Show Must Go Online's respective versions of *Hamlet*, with a particular emphasis on the virtual "ghosts" left behind by the productions—by which I mean the projects' existence in the archival space, both in terms of the recorded works themselves, and the remaining evidence of the audience's engagement with the productions that can still be seen on social media and in the videos' comments and live chat feeds. The virtual platforms on which these works were created and presented not only provided a unique viewing experience when they premiered, but also allow for audiences after the fact to see a snapshot of those original audiences. Drawing from the works of scholars such as Philip Auslander, Peggy Phelan, and Erin Sullivan on the idea of what defines liveness in the virtual space, and how and to what extent recorded works can be "live", this chapter will analyse the ways in which these productions' recordings can still be used by present-day audiences to observe these "virtual ghosts" and draw inspiration for similar projects in the future. Additionally, this chapter will interrogate Phelan's central thesis that truly live performance *cannot* exist in the online space, and discuss how advancements in digital technology have changed the equation since the initial publication of her work in the 1990s. The chapter will also discuss how these productions blur the lines between actor and audience member through the use of virtual platforms and their ability to allow for direct interaction between the audience members and the cast, on social media before and after the show and sometimes even during the show in the comments or live chat on YouTube. Sofa Shakespeare's version of the play was the last production in the project's run, so this chapter will present the play in contrast with its first production, *Romeo and Juliet*, discussed in a previous chapter.

Although both projects discussed in this thesis also featured comedies and histories in their respective catalogues, my decision to use tragedies for all three case studies is a deliberate one. Comedy and levity can serve an important purpose during dark and difficult times, and have certainly proven to do so over the course of both projects, but this thesis seeks to highlight the parallels between onstage tragedy and real-world global tragedy, and how the former can be used as a means of processing and moving on from the latter. Sofa Shakespeare plays with the tragic genre by recontextualising it into a format that wildly vacillates between serious, silly, and irreverent, inviting participants to claim these tragic tales as their own and control the narrative however they wish within

the (fairly loose) parameters of the format. *The Show Must Go Online*, with its heavy focus on audience engagement before, after, and during the shows, invited audience members to experience these tragedies alongside one another and share in a collective moment during a time when separation was the norm for many. All four productions discussed in this thesis feature elements of comedy to varying degrees, highlighting the spaces where comedy and tragedy intersect and reminding audiences that happiness can prevail even when things are at their most bleak.

I began writing and researching for this thesis in September 2021, when lockdown was still very much in effect in many parts of the world, and the projects discussed in this thesis had concluded within the year prior (*Sofa Shakespeare* in March 2021, and *The Show Must Go Online* in November 2020). In the roughly three and a half years since then, there have of course been many changes to the state of COVID-19 prevention and the state of the world as a whole: vaccines and new treatment options have vastly reduced the number of deaths and other serious outcomes from the disease, and lockdowns are no longer enforced on a large scale. Live and in-person theatre has fully resumed, despite many theatre companies taking severe financial hits during lockdown.

That being said, for the purposes of this thesis, I have elected to use the term “post-lockdown” rather than “post-pandemic” or “post-COVID-19” when describing the current state of things. Although day-to-day life has mostly returned to “normal” for most people, COVID-19 still exists and is still very much a threat to many, especially elderly, disabled, and immunocompromised people who may be less responsive to treatment or susceptible to more serious outcomes. “Long COVID”, or the colloquial term used to describe the symptoms that can sometimes remain for months, years, or even longer following the initial infection, is currently under-researched with few effective treatment options available. To that end, although I use the past tense when discussing lockdown in this thesis, my intent is not to imply that COVID-19 is no longer a concern or threat. The worst may have passed with regard to mass deaths, and the impact of COVID-19 with regard to the issues discussed in thesis (i.e. theatre closures) may have been significantly lessened in these past three and a half years, but this thesis does not aim to prove or even suggest that COVID-19 is no longer an ongoing risk.

III. “Liveness” and the Role of the Audience

Both before, during, and after lockdown, a frequently recurring topic of debate when discussing livestreamed productions has been the definition of the word “live.”

Many argued that live theatre could only exist when the actors and audience members occupied the same physical space, and streamed productions – even if they were streamed in real time – did not meet that definition. Peggy Phelan, for example, has famously argued that “Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance”.¹⁴ However, technology has advanced considerably in the roughly three decades since Phelan made this claim, and general attitudes toward the legitimacy of online theatre have shifted with the advent of new virtual platforms. Others – especially in more recent years – have argued that advances in technology could produce an experience that was functionally just as “live” as in-person theatre. Social media, especially interactions on platforms such as Twitter, could enhance this feeling of “liveness” by giving audience members the opportunity to interact with one another. Joanna Bucknall describes her experience of live-Tweeting a streamed production (Forced Entertainment’s *Complete Works*) in her and Kirsty Sedgman’s chapter “Documenting Audience Experience: Social Media as a Lively Stratification” as follows: “This immediately developed a direct dialogue between participants across the globe [...] Because the dialogue was performed in cyberspace, my responses had a direct impact on other tweeters’ experience of the performance”.¹⁵ Though audience participation wasn’t possible in the traditional sense (i.e. audience members weren’t able to interact with or respond to the performers face-to-face), the audience members were able to interact with each other via social media in a way that generally isn’t possible when watching an in-person performance. This shared experience, though different from the shared experience that comes from watching an in-person production, nonetheless created a sense of liveness and audience cohesion.

Twitter (now called X)¹⁶ and other social media platforms were also crucial to the world of livestreamed theatre prior to the pandemic, although audience members were not always able to tweet during the show as in Bucknall’s example above. Because many of these events were streamed to movie theatres rather than to personal devices that viewers could access in their homes, audiences did not have access to their phones during the streams. Therefore, the majority of social media posts happened directly before or after

¹⁴ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Routledge, 1996), 145.

¹⁵ Joanna Bucknall and Kirsty Sedgman, “Documenting Audience Experience: Social Media as a Lively Stratification”, in *Documenting Performance*, ed. Toni Sant (Bloomsbury, 2017), 128.

¹⁶ Because Twitter did not rebrand as X until 2023, I have elected to use their original name when referring to works that were produced prior to the rebrand.

the show, or during the intermission. Erin Sullivan, in an analysis of tweets by audience members at the livestream of Kenneth Branagh Theatre Company's *Romeo and Juliet*, observed a massive influx of tweets in the thirty minutes before the start of the stream, then an abrupt stop once the show started, and then another influx during the intermission.¹⁷ The audience's social media presence enhanced the feeling of "togetherness" between audience members at different movie theatres, but did little to facilitate interactions between audience members during the performance. This is not markedly different from social media usage during most in-person performances, since audience members are of course generally expected to put their phones away during the performance, but it is a significant contrast to productions that are streamed to devices in the audience members' homes.

During COVID-19, text-based audience interaction during streamed performances became the standard rather than the exception. Social media was still a popular platform for these interactions, but Zoom, YouTube, and Facebook Live took advantage of a relatively new medium: audience chat boxes. These chat boxes, unlike social media platforms, were only available to the audience during the initial livestream. (The messages in the chat box could usually still be viewed later on, but adding new messages or editing existing ones wasn't possible.) This limited-time availability highlighted the ephemerality and "liveness" of the event, much like an in-person production only exists for one specific moment in time. Even when being viewed as part of a recording after the fact, however, chat boxes had the advantage of appearing alongside video and audio feed, corresponding with the exact moment they were sent during the live production. This allowed actors and audience members—in both the livestream and the recording—to read audience commentary in real time. (It is also possible to determine the exact point in a livestream that a tweet was sent based on the timestamp, but this process involves switching between multiple platforms and is not as immediate or streamlined as watching a chat box.) Because streaming platforms such as Twitch (a platform designed mainly for streaming video games) were already popular prior to the onset of the pandemic, many audience members were already familiar with the idea of an audience chat box and were therefore able to easily translate it into a theatrical context.

¹⁷ Erin Sullivan, "The Audience is Present: Aliveness, Social Media, and the Theatre Broadcast Experience," in *Shakespeare and the 'Live' Theatre Broadcast Experience*, eds. Pascale Aebischer, Susanne Greenhalgh, and Laurie Osborne (Bloomsbury, 2018), 69-70.

Finding ways to play with the idea of the audience (or more specifically, the actor/audience member relationship) was a hallmark of lockdown-era theatre, since audiences in their traditional form couldn't exist. Sometimes this meant drawing attention to the lack of a live audience in the physical performance space: while pre-pandemic livestreams often included shots of the in-person audience to highlight the stream's authenticity, livestreams during the pandemic frequently showed shots of an empty theatre or alternative performance space. The Old Vic theatre filmed their streams from the back of the stage so that the empty seats were visible behind the performers, reminding the audience that the actors were ostensibly performing to an empty house.¹⁸ The works discussed in this thesis frequently feature shots of the actors' homes, or at least have their makeshift performance spaces visible in the background, emphasising the domestic settings in which they were produced. Gemma Kate Allred refers to this idea as "shared distance rather than shared proximity"¹⁹ - paradoxically, the distance itself is what allows the audience to feel a connection to the performers and to one another.

The positioning of the audience was manipulated even further in productions where the actors performed in isolation from one another as well as the audience. In Zoom productions, the meeting host(s) are able to decide which participants are able to use their cameras and microphones, as well as whose messages in the chat box are visible to all participants. Typically, only the actors are allowed to use their cameras and microphones while all participants can view and comment in the chat box, but some companies have chosen to experiment with these ideas. Big Telly's *Macbeth*, for example, encouraged audience participation by allowing audience members to appear on camera during certain scenes—for example, as guests in the banquet where Banquo's ghost appears.²⁰ Big Telly and Creation Theatre's *The Tempest* (a reimagined reprise of a show that had originally been performed in-person prior to lockdown) involved the audience in a similar fashion, inviting them to shake their devices to imitate a storm or inviting them to turn on their device cameras and appear onscreen as wedding guests.²¹ These

¹⁸ Gemma Kate Allred, "Notions of Liveness in Lockdown Performance," in *Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation*, eds. Gemma Kate Allred, Benjamin Broadribb, and Erin Sullivan (Bloomsbury, 2021), 66.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

²¹ Pascale Aebischer and Rachael Nicholas, "Creation Theatre and Big Telly's *The Tempest*: Digital Theatre and the Performing Audience," in *Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation*, eds. Gemma Kate Allred, Benjamin Broadribb, and Erin Sullivan (Bloomsbury, 2021), 94.

mechanics also served as a way of holding the audience's attention, since Zoom audience members often have more distractions than they would in a theatre.

The flexibility of the Zoom platform also allowed audience members the opportunity to customize their viewing experience, at least to a degree. Zoom allows participants to choose two different viewing layouts: "speaker view," which shows one participant at a time depending on who is speaking, or "gallery view," which shows multiple participants in individual "tiles." If audience members are invited to turn on their cameras, they have the choice of whether or not to do so. They can decide what sort of device they want to watch on (smartphone, laptop, tablet, television, etc.) and to what degree they want to mimic a theatrical environment by dimming the lights and removing distractions. Some platforms, such as YouTube, allow viewers to pause a livestream and then either skip ahead or watch the remainder of the broadcast on a delay. The production team can make requests for how they'd prefer the audience to watch the show, but they have very little ability to ensure that those requests are followed—or, in many cases, even know for sure if the audience is complying or not. Because the physical constraints of in-person theatre as well as the etiquette conventions of a shared space do not tend to allow the audience this degree of freedom with regard to how they view the production, this introduced a new set of "rules" for audience members to follow and theatre-makers to consider when creating work.

The question of "liveness" is of course still an important one in the aftermath of lockdown as well, but I argue that the events of 2020 and 2021 have changed this equation somewhat. When in-person theatre becomes dangerous or impossible, virtual platforms become a means of facilitating "live" interpersonal connections: rather than adding an extra layer of separation between actors and audience members, they help to minimise the perceived distance between the two. While virtual theatre is, of course, distinctly different than in-person theatre in many ways, virtual productions can effectively facilitate the connections afforded by its in-person counterpart.

By building on the existing scholarship surrounding digitally-mediated Shakespearean performance, notions of "liveness" with regard to virtual performance spaces, and accounts of online performance during COVID-19, this thesis will explore the ways in which these productions were used to build community and foster interpersonal connection during the lockdowns. Furthermore, this thesis will expand on these connections between Shakespeare, the plague, and COVID-19—with regard not only to the ways in which Shakespeare influenced modern understandings of disease and contagion,

but also how COVID-19 can be positioned within the broader history of theatrical performances of Shakespearean works during disease outbreaks. Shakespearean theatre has existed alongside widespread disease for as long as the plays themselves have existed, and this thesis will demonstrate how technological advances and online performance spaces have created new formats for these existing practices.

IV. Literature Review

In order to discuss the virtual performances explored in this dissertation, especially with regard to the ways in which they facilitate connection and community, it is first necessary to explain how the use of digital technology in theatre has historically related to the concept of distance—and, conversely—the ability to facilitate presence and connection. Much of the discussion around the use of digital and virtual effects in theatrical productions relates to the distancing effects caused by technology’s artificiality, a phenomenon Matthew Causey describes as “presence at a distance” in *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture*.²² Much of Causey’s writing discusses the uncanny or othering effect of seeing a live actor represented in the artificial digital space, describing these two states as the “immediacy of performance” contrasted with the “digital alterability of time and space through technology.”²³ As with Phelan’s writing, however, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture* was published long before COVID-19, and at a time when digital technology was not as advanced as it is today (albeit a decade after the publication of Phelan’s *Unmarked*). Viewed within the context of scenarios in which in-person contact is difficult or impossible but online communication is relatively accessible, this contrast between the virtual and the “immediate” often serves a different function: rather than create a virtual layer of separation between actor and audience member, this “presence at a distance” can allow actors and audience members to occupy the same (virtual) space when physical co-presence stops being possible. Rather than create a false sense of distance using audiovisual augmentation, technology can instead be used to bridge an actual distance between performers and/or spectators who are unable to be physically present in a shared space. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, when physical presence between individuals from separate households was severely limited, telepresence became crucial for facilitating interpersonal connection and, by extension,

²² Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture* (Routledge, 2006), p. 39. See also: Causey’s discussion of split subjectivity, 17.

²³ *Ibid.*, 30.

the sense of presence that is inherent to live theatre—while also offering new models for ways in which ‘live’ theatre can exist.

Causey does not make the claim that technology exists in direct opposition to live, in-person theatre: in fact, he explicitly states in *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture* that “There is nothing in cyberspace or in the screen technologies of the virtual that has not already been performed on the stage. The theatre has always been virtual, a space of illusory immediacy.”²⁴ Rather, he discusses the ways in which the incorporation of televisual elements in theatrical productions can be used to manipulate or transform the performing subject’s positioning in time and space. He goes on to explain that these inclusions of technology allow performance to become “what performance has never been: here and not here, now and not now, simultaneously.”²⁵ W.B. Worthen presents a comparable idea in *Shakespeare, Technicity, Theatre* by describing the transposition of performance onto the screen as “remediated theatre,” a process which “implies only that the work has been transferred to an alternative platform, one that reshapes its use and experience in a range of ways, without implying a necessary degradation [...] of the originating work.”²⁶ Technology does not make a performing subject less live or less real; rather, it simply presents the subject in a different form. This altered form can be used to manipulate the audience’s sense of distance from the performer, either by creating an artificial layer of separation or by manufacturing a sense of closeness. This phenomenon of manufactured distance or closeness is not entirely unique to contemporary audiovisual technology: Causey discusses the use of Early Modern perspective stages as an earlier method of manipulating the audience’s sense of distance from the performer.²⁷ However, the advent of technologies such as video recording and live broadcasting have allowed for far greater distances between actor and performer, no longer necessitating that they be in the same physical space at all. Thus, modern technology and virtual theatre spaces have created a greater ability to manipulate the sense of distance, and allowed for interpersonal connections to more readily exist over long physical distances. This idea takes on an even greater importance in the case of the COVID-19 lockdowns. As opposed to other pandemics on this scale throughout human history, COVID-19 happened during a time when advanced technology could be used to facilitate immediate connection between

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁶ W.B. Worthen, *Shakespeare, Technicity, Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 18.

²⁷ Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture*, 68-90.

people who were unable to be physically close to each other—and thus, a new context for Causey’s idea of repositioning the performing subject and Worthen’s remediated spaces. Works discussed in this dissertation further push the boundaries of this repositioning and remediation, often stretching across temporal distances as well as physical ones, but I argue that the format illustrates Causey’s idea of “now and not now, simultaneously”²⁸: the virtual format allows for connections to be forged without necessitating a singular time and place.

Philip Auslander discusses the idea of liveness and co-presence in virtual theatre in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, the third edition of which specifically addresses the issue of COVID-19 and the effect it had on theatrical performance. (Earlier editions were published prior to the pandemic, and therefore do not address these issues.) Auslander argues that distance as a concept is inherent to the “liveness” of any particular performance, and that liveness comes from “the tension between our sense of being connected experientially to something while it is happening while also remaining at a distance from it.”²⁹ All performance, both in-person and technologically mediated, features some sense of distance or separation between actor and audience member. Auslander explains that “This distance can be physical, as in live broadcasts or a live stream [...], or it can be a matter of consciousness, as in cases where my distance from the performer is a function of our relationship’s having been framed as an interaction between [...] performers and spectators.”³⁰ As with Causey’s discussion of the early modern perspective stage, Auslander points out that modern audiovisual technology is just one method for manipulating this sense of distance. Auslander also argues that the interpersonal connections often associated with live performance do not necessarily have to happen with the performers physically present, and that “mediatized performance makes just as effective a focal point for the gathering of a social group as live performance”³¹—an idea that is demonstrated by *Sofa Shakespeare*, which used social media as a virtual gathering space for participants. However, Auslander argues that this sort of connection between audience members becomes more tenuous when the audience members are physically distant from one another (as was typically the case during COVID-19), and that “Even if a viewer knows that they are watching along with 97 other

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁹ Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, Third Edition (Routledge, 2023), 25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

people, the presence of those other people is conceptual rather than directly perceptible.”³² While it is true that the physical distance between audience members does create challenges in terms of interpersonal connection, I argue that these connections were still possible and very much present in lockdown-era theatre, largely through the use of social media. Even in the earliest weeks of the pandemic, as in the case of Sofa Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, theatre-makers and theatregoers were seeking community with others and using these online spaces to facilitate the interpersonal connections that were becoming increasingly challenging in person.

Erin Sullivan builds on Auslander’s idea of liveness further and addresses its relationship to Shakespeare in her book, *Shakespeare and Digital Performance in Practice*, which extensively discusses the idea of presence as it relates to virtual Shakespearean productions. Sullivan argues that “If actors and audience members can be present with one another in different kinds of ways, then it follows that digital technology can be used to create theatre that stretches across previously unimaginable geographical, temporal, and social divides”³³ –a sentiment reflected by Sofa Shakespeare’s crowdsourced format. Again, presence (and therefore, distance) has always been a factor in theatrical staging; however, the advent of digital technologies has allowed these manipulations of distance to take place over much greater distances. Sullivan also discusses the impact of technology on the “liveness” of theatrical events, arguing that “liveness” must be redefined in terms of “aliveness”: in other words, the degree to which participants can “bring a performance to life through their collective engagement with it.”³⁴ This can involve being in the same temporal and physical space, as with a fully in-person theatrical performance with actors and audience members present in the space, but it can also happen over greater physical or even temporal distances. In her study, Sullivan cites “watch parties,” in which a group of people collectively watch a live or pre-recorded stream of a theatrical event, as an example of such a phenomenon³⁵ –a format that was used for the premieres of Sofa Shakespeare’s and The Show Must Go Online’s productions. Though these phenomena are not unique to virtual stagings of Shakespearean plays, Sullivan uses Shakespeare as a framework in part due to the “canonical, classical, and seemingly traditional” nature of his work.³⁶ By discussing the

³² *Ibid.*, 66.

³³ Erin Sullivan, *Shakespeare and Digital Performance in Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 31.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

impact of virtual effects on Shakespeare's work specifically, these works are positioned within the broader, historically-rich context of Shakespearean theatre as a whole.

To further illustrate the impact of digital effects in Shakespearean performance, *Shakespeare, Spectatorship, and the Technologies of Performance* by Pascale Aebischer proposes the division of the (virtual or physical) performance space into the 'locus' and 'platea', concepts adapted from Robert Weimann's writings on theatrical stagings in late medieval Europe.³⁷ The *locus*, in Weimann's writing, refers to a self-contained area of the stage representing a specific location, in which the actors would have no direct contact with the audience. The *platea* refers to the outer edges of the stage on which actors were free to directly address or interact with the audience. Aebischer expands on these definitions to extend past the medieval stage and include contemporary and often digitally-augmented spaces in Shakespearean theatre: the *locus* as a (physical or virtual) performance space distinctly separate from the audience, and the *platea* as a platform for actor-audience connection and interaction (often extending to include social media platforms such as Twitter).³⁸ This framing is useful when discussing the manipulation of distance afforded by Causey's concept of digitally mediated performance: the distancing effect of artificiality can serve as a virtual *locus*, while the digital format's ability to simulate presence between multiple physical spaces allows for a *platea* where interaction and connection can take place. Aebischer goes on to describe this sense of connection as the "separate-yet-together form of co-presence afforded by cyberperformance,"³⁹ referring to the ways in which online spaces can uniquely serve as not only a platform for performing virtual productions, but for facilitating interactions between actor and audience member. The works discussed in this thesis placed a heavy emphasis on audience engagement and community building, and Aebischer's work demonstrates how online performance spaces are uniquely positioned to facilitate this despite their lack of in-person contact.

Early Modern Liveness: Mediating Presence in Text, Stage, and Screen, edited by Danielle Rosvally and Donovan Sherman, considers the concept of liveness as it pertains to early modern theatre—both in terms of contemporary understandings of what it means for a production to be "live," and in terms of early modern definitions of liveness. In a

³⁷ Weimann 1978, cited in Pascale Aebischer, *Shakespeare, Spectatorship, and the Technologies of Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 14.

³⁸ Pascale Aebischer, *Shakespeare, Spectatorship, and the Technologies of Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 14-48.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

similar vein as Sullivan and Auslander, Rosvally and Sherman argue that liveness “is not a phenomenon unique to brick-and-mortar theatre experience but instead drafted by a feeling of copresence.”⁴⁰ The first of the book’s three sections, entitled “Proximity,” discusses how and to what extent the physical distance between actor and audience member impacts the “liveness” of a production—a concept that is not only pertinent when discussing the physical distances between participants in virtual productions during COVID-19, but also when comparing early modern understandings of liveness with contemporary ones. Stephanie Shirilan argues in her chapter “Impressions of Liveness in Shakespeare, at a Distance” that “the sharp ontological distinction between presence and absence [...] is largely incompatible with early modern theories of presence”⁴¹ and that “the function of distance [is] crucial to the experience of atmospheric liveness as a theatrical effect in Shakespeare.”⁴² Building on the idea stated in the introduction that early modern discussions of theatre do not praise it as an essentially live or immediate art form, and that this idea only emerged “after a declinist narrative had been established, generations later”,⁴³ Shirilan argues that equating presence with physical distance is not necessarily in line with early modern understandings of this idea. Thomas Cartelli’s chapter entitled “Medium Specificity, Medium Convergence and Aliveness in the Chromakey (2018) and Big Telly Zoom (2020) *Macbeths*” compares two different virtually-mediated productions of *Macbeth*, one pre-pandemic and one streamed on Zoom during lockdown. In this chapter, Cartelli adopts Sullivan’s idea of discussing virtually-mediated productions in terms of “aliveness” rather than liveness, and that aliveness can “compensate for whatever deficit of liveness is recorded or experienced.”⁴⁴

The intent of this thesis is not to argue that this “separate-yet-together form of co-presence” can or should fully replace in-person theatrical productions, that physical distance and face-to-face co-presence are no longer important or relevant following the advent of these new technologies, or that the COVID-19 lockdowns did not make audience engagement and connection more difficult than it otherwise would have been.

⁴⁰ Danielle Rosvally and Donovan Sherman. Introduction to *Early Modern Liveness: Mediating Presence in Text, Stage and Screen*, ed. Danielle Rosvally and Donovan Sherman (Bloomsbury, 2023), 1-11.

⁴¹ Stephanie Shirilan, “Impressions of Liveness in Shakespeare, at a Distance,” in *Early Modern Liveness: Mediating Presence in Text, Stage and Screen*, ed. Danielle Rosvally and Donovan Sherman (Bloomsbury, 2023), 38-60.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴³ Rosvally and Sherman, *Early Modern Liveness*, 8.

⁴⁴ Thomas Cartelli, “Medium Specificity, Medium Convergence and Aliveness in the Chromakey (2018) and Big Telly (2020) *Macbeths*,” in *Early Modern Liveness: Mediating Presence in Text, Stage and Screen*, ed. Danielle Rosvally and Donovan Sherman (Bloomsbury, 2023), 61-86.

Rather, I argue that virtual performance spaces can and do facilitate genuine connections and community, despite the fact that they cannot replicate in-person performance spaces—especially in situations such as COVID-19, in which in-person performance opportunities were limited or impossible. Sullivan acknowledges the value of the in-person performance space by saying that “there is a focusing power in being present with a work of art and allowing it to block out other kinds of experience, if only for a moment”,⁴⁵ referring to the attention often commanded by an in-person production or work of art and the lack of distractions within a dedicated performance space. However, Sullivan then goes on to argue that “concentrating one’s attention can be challenging in a technologically dispersed context, but it is not impossible. Nor is it the case that being somewhere in person automatically engenders deep, absorbing focus”.⁴⁶ Though live theatre and virtual theatre are different experiences, they are, according to Sullivan, capable of facilitating the same level of audience engagement and connection. Again, this becomes a pertinent point when discussing the COVID-19 lockdowns, because in-person presence on a large scale was not feasible during that time and alternate methods were necessary in order for theatre to exist at all—thus creating a demand for the projects discussed in this dissertation.

YouTube is the primary platform for the majority of the works discussed in this dissertation, and the history of Shakespearean performance on YouTube extends far beyond the scope of COVID-19. Stephen O’Neill’s *Shakespeare and YouTube: New Media Forms of the Bard* discusses how the appearance of Shakespearean work on the platform has influenced popular culture as well as scholarly outputs. O’Neill considers YouTube to be “a space to participate in what Shakespeare means”⁴⁷ as well as a space to “bridge the gap between popular culture and Shakespeare’s more institutional markings”⁴⁸—since the content hosted by YouTube is created by its users, the platform allows for direct interaction and engagement with Shakespearean works, and serves as an archive of free and easily-accessible Shakespearean content. For the purposes of this dissertation, O’Neill’s book lays the foundation for the body of Shakespearean work that was already present on YouTube prior to the lockdowns, as well as the established trends and common practices for presenting the work and optimising it for the platform.

⁴⁵ Sullivan, *Shakespeare and Digital Performance in Practice*, 39.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁷ Stephen O’Neill, *Shakespeare and YouTube*, (Bloomsbury, 2014), 3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

It is worth noting, however, that *Shakespeare and YouTube* was published in 2014, and much has changed about the platform in the near-decade since its publication. O'Neill describes YouTube as creating "a sense of Shakespeare as a body of knowledge that is shifting, incomplete and thus awaiting new interventions"⁴⁹—a sentiment which, I argue, also applies to YouTube itself as a platform, rather than just its catalogue of Shakespearean works. Although YouTube's primary function as a video-hosting platform hasn't meaningfully changed since *Shakespeare and YouTube* was published, new content is constantly being uploaded to the platform, and new trends have emerged as a result. As with any platform that relies on user-generated content, the platform changes along with the userbase, as do the ways in which users interact with the content that is currently available. Many statistics in the book are also no longer accurate: for example, O'Neill states that a search for "*Romeo and Juliet*" on YouTube returns around 86,000 results,⁵⁰ a number that is well over two million at the time of this writing.⁵¹ Although the book's commentary on YouTube's function and efficacy as a platform for sharing and viewing Shakespearean works still largely applies to the present day and this project specifically, the data presented in the text is not reflective of YouTube's status during the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021.

Christy Desmet's article "The Art of Curation: Searching for Global Shakespeares in the Digital Archives" from the Fall 2017 issue of *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* discusses the efficacy of YouTube as an archive for digital Shakespearean works, especially in comparison to curated digital collections. Desmet points to the ever-changing nature of the content available on YouTube (as discussed in the previous paragraph), and describes the platform as "sloppy" and "unstable"⁵² when it comes to the accessibility of its archive and its associated metadata. She also notes that much of the Shakespearean content put forward by YouTube's algorithm is very western-centric (and often US-centric): a search for *Romeo and Juliet* at the time of publication did not return any results for a non-English-speaking production until three pages in, and a production from outside North America or Europe did not

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵¹ This increase may be purely due to the increased number of videos on the platform; however, it is also worth noting that updates to YouTube's search feature may have also had an impact on the number of results that appear for a given search.

⁵² Christy Desmet, "The Art of Curation: Searching for Global Shakespeares in the Digital Archives," *Borrowers and Lenders* 11, no. 1 (2017), 11.

appear until the ninth page of search results.⁵³ However, Desmet also acknowledges that the act of browsing through YouTube's archives can encourage the user to create their own curated collection: she argues that "the fun and frustration of marshalling those items into some semblance of order offers practice in the art of curating".⁵⁴ Desmet's article highlights the personalised nature of interactions with Shakespearean content on YouTube, which is a crucial framework when analysing how viewers interacted with YouTube-based productions during the pandemic. Because *The Show Must Go Online* and *Sofa Shakespeare* both relied heavily on active audience engagement, the article provides a framework for the ways in which YouTube as a platform can both help and hinder this goal.

Shakespeare and the Digital World: Redefining Scholarship and Practice, edited by Christie Carson and Peter Kirwan and also published in 2014 (the same year as O'Neill's book), is another text that lays the foundation for virtual interpretations of Shakespeare prior to COVID-19. The book largely focuses on Shakespearean scholarship rather than performance; however, several chapters do discuss how digitally-mediated performance spaces impact aspects of the production such as audience interaction, liveness, and accessibility. The book discusses the shift from "social media as gateway to the Shakespearean performance to social media *as* the Shakespearean performance,"⁵⁵ a distinction that brings to mind the social media spaces associated with projects such as *The Show Must Go Online* and *Sofa Shakespeare*—as well as Aebischer's concept of the virtual *platea*.⁵⁶ Although it was published several years before the pandemic, *Shakespeare and the Digital World* lays the groundwork for the state of virtual Shakespearean theatre in the years leading up to COVID-19, and the shift toward virtual mediums that was already beginning to take place.

One of the earliest volumes to emerge that covers the practice of Shakespearean theatre performance during lockdown is Pascale Aebischer's *Viral Shakespeare: Performance in the Time of Pandemic*, published in 2021. *Viral Shakespeare* is a two-part text that largely focuses on the author's experience of watching livestreams of various Shakespearean productions during the first two months of lockdown in 2020, beginning with the closure of theatres in the UK on March 23rd. Aebischer describes the book as

⁵³ *Ibid*, 11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 12.

⁵⁵ Christie Carson and Peter Kirwan, *Shakespeare and the Digital World: Redefining Scholarship and Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 239.

⁵⁶ Aebischer, *Shakespeare, Spectatorship, and the Technologies of Performance*, 14-18.

being “written from within the conditions of lockdown,” having written the majority of it in 2020 while lockdown was still in effect in the UK.⁵⁷ As such, this text serves as a first-person account of an audience member’s experience of watching these productions, as well as a snapshot into the earliest months of the pandemic and the work that was being produced during that time. Additionally, *Viral Shakespeare* discusses the video-conferencing platform Zoom as a virtual performance space. Since Zoom was rarely used as a platform for theatrical work prior to the onset of COVID-19, this book is one of the earliest critical analyses of its efficacy as a performance space.

Although it is not a primary focus of the book, Aebischer does briefly address the connections between the plagues in Shakespeare’s era and the modern-day COVID-19 lockdowns: according to Aebischer, “Shakespeare [...] began to be associated with extraordinary productivity and creative genius that was linked to the newly widespread scenario of social isolation for fear of contagion,”⁵⁸ citing viral social media posts from 2020 that claimed Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* and *Macbeth* while in quarantine from the plague. Although this idea is, at best, an oversimplification of the actual historical record, these references were nonetheless prevalent in popular culture and thus, in Aebischer’s words, cast Shakespeare as “a figure for community at a time of isolation, and the ability for art in general and theatre more specifically to reach beyond the boundaries set up by lockdown conditions and connect artists with their audiences and audiences with one another”.⁵⁹ The presence of Shakespearean imagery and references to Shakespeare on social media in the early months of lockdown caused Shakespeare himself to “[go] viral”⁶⁰ during this time period, which at least in part led to the creation of the body of work chronicled in *Viral Shakespeare*.

Viral Shakespeare is divided into two sections: “Archival Obsessions” and “Live Digital Shakespeare.” The first section is focused primarily on streams of pre-recorded theatrical productions that were filmed prior to the pandemic and made available for streaming during lockdown. The second section concerns livestreamed productions that were produced and performed during lockdown, and streamed to online platforms such as Zoom and YouTube (i.e. the types of productions highlighted by this dissertation). Aebischer’s view of these livestreamed productions is critical at times, especially

⁵⁷ Pascale Aebischer, *Viral Shakespeare: Performance in the Time of Pandemic* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 8.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

regarding the ways in which audience participation can function in digitally-mediated performance spaces. In Big Telly Theatre's livestreamed production of *Macbeth*, for example, the audience is invited to turn on their cameras and have their faces appear onscreen as "guests" in the banquet scene—an experience that Aebischer describes as having "profound awkwardness and a peculiar sensation of disembodiment" and "a malign body-snatching intrusion into my home space".⁶¹ Though much of the writing (academic and otherwise) surrounding livestreamed theatre during lockdown praises the sense of intimacy afforded by giving audiences a glimpse into other participants' homes, Aebischer presents an alternate angle: these glimpses can also feel intrusive, especially when audience members are asked to participate without prior warning.

Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation, edited by Gemma Kate Allred, Benjamin Broadribb, and Erin Sullivan, builds on these pre-pandemic notions of virtual stagings of Shakespearean theatre by presenting a comprehensive overview of digital Shakespearean performance during COVID-19. Published in 2022, roughly two years after the World Health Organization's classification of COVID-19 as a pandemic and the subsequent widespread lockdowns, the scope of the book primarily covers the timeframe in which the majority of theatre closures took place: a fourteen-month period beginning in March 2020 and ending around May 2021. (That is not to say that theatre closures or restrictions did not extend beyond this period in some parts of the world, or that virtual productions stopped once theatres began to reopen—as this dissertation will discuss, some theatre companies continued to produce livestreamed or otherwise digitally-mediated works even after in-person productions were possible. However, *Lockdown Shakespeare* is focused on this initial period of theatre closures.) The book is a retrospective of the various Shakespearean productions that took place during this time—from established companies such as Creation Theatre, as well as new projects like *The Show Must Go Online* and *Sofa Shakespeare*, both of which were created directly in response to the theatre closures. The book begins with a series of critical essays analysing various virtual productions that took place during lockdown, followed by a series of interviews with theatre practitioners who worked on "lockdown-era" productions, and concludes with a chronological retrospective of the most prevalent Shakespearean works from Spring 2020 to Spring 2021.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

In the introduction to *Lockdown Shakespeare*, Benjamin Broadribb and Gemma Kate Allred dispute the popular media narrative that theatre was not happening at all (or only happening in a very limited capacity) during the theatre closures of 2020 and 2021, describing these statements as “categorically untrue”: although in-person theatre was generally not possible during this time, to say that theatre wasn’t happening at all is to ignore the enormous variety of virtual productions that were taking place from the onset of lockdown.⁶² Broadribb and Allred also address the practice of theatre companies releasing recordings of past (pre-lockdown) productions online—while this was a popular way for the public to watch theatre during this time, they differentiate these recordings from the productions described in *Lockdown Shakespeare* that were created during the lockdowns. According to Broadribb, these recordings—which often included footage of densely-packed in-person audiences—“created a subconscious association for the public of pandemic theatre being past rather than present”⁶³ and a sense of “cultural distancing”⁶⁴ stemming from the disconnect between the live theatrical experience shown in the recordings and the reality of the conditions in which the recordings were being viewed. Conversely, projects created during lockdown and designed specifically for viewers in lockdown highlight the conditions under which they were produced, and therefore serve as a representation of the theatrical world during this period. This dissertation also makes this distinction, and will further this idea by connecting these “lockdown-specific” productions to the works created during plague-related theatre closures during Shakespeare’s time.

Benjamin Broadribb’s chapter in *Lockdown Shakespeare*, “Lockdown Shakespeare and the Metamodern Sensibility,” is one of currently very few pieces of academic writing that discusses the Sofa Shakespeare project in depth. Broadribb argues that Sofa Shakespeare is an inherently metamodern work—a term that Broadribb defines as being characterised by a sense of sincerity and depth, as opposed to the inauthenticity and detachment of postmodern works.⁶⁵ Although he acknowledges that the deconstruction of Shakespearean texts is a postmodern feature, the focus on community and forming

⁶² Benjamin Broadribb and Gemma Kate Allred, introduction to *Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation*, eds. Broadribb, Allred, and Sullivan. (Bloomsbury, 2022), 2.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁵ Benjamin Broadribb, “Lockdown Shakespeare and the Metamodern Sensibility,” in *Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation*, eds. Broadribb, Allred, and Sullivan. (Bloomsbury, 2022), 46-47.

genuine connections across geographical distances characterises the project as distinctly modern.⁶⁶ I build on this idea in this dissertation by discussing Sofa Shakespeare's community-building aspects not only in terms of the creation of works themselves, but also in terms of the surrounding communities formed on social media by participants and viewers of the project.

"Shakespeare for Everyone," one of the case studies presented in *Lockdown Shakespeare*, is an interview with several cast and production team members of The Show Must Go Online, in conversation with Broadribb and Allred. The interview is largely focused on the project's inclusive nature and its commitment to diversity. Rob Myles, the project's director and creator, states in the interview that a central aim of the project was to "unpick the threads of exclusion that have been so tightly woven by cultural imperialists who have weaponized Shakespeare for generations"⁶⁷—a goal the project sought to achieve by prioritising diversity in casting. The interview also discusses the project's merits in terms of cultivating a global community, and how the project may inspire theatre-makers in the future to work towards accessibility for all in theatre-making spaces.

Carlotta Susca's article "To Meme or Not to Meme, And to Do So During a Pandemic: Shakespeare and the Memetic Transmission of a Classic," which appeared in a 2021 special issue of *Lingue e Linguaggi*, returns to Aebischer's idea of "viral Shakespeare" and the ways in which Shakespeare (both in terms of his plays and his status as a cultural figure in his own right) appeared in internet memes during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Though the article does not discuss lockdown-era Shakespearean performance in depth, it does discuss the ways in which Shakespeare appeared in popular culture: Susca posits that Shakespeare's cultural relevance across generations gives him what Susca refers to as "meminess," or "a unique combination of elements which favors its time traveling in the form of memes."⁶⁸ In this thesis, I will take this idea further by demonstrating how the broader history of Shakespearean performance during disease outbreaks (especially the London plague outbreaks of the late 16th and early 17th

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 51.

⁶⁷ Rob Myles, quoted in "Shakespeare for Everyone," interview by Gemma Kate Allred and Benjamin Broadribb, in *Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation*, eds. Broadribb, Allred, and Sullivan. (Bloomsbury, 2022), 155

⁶⁸ Carlotta Susca, "To Meme or Not to Meme, and to Do So During a Pandemic: Shakespeare and the Memetic Transmission of a Classic," in *Lingue e Linguaggi* 45, 2021, 216.

centuries) has contributed to society's cultural understandings of Shakespeare as a figure specifically associated with widespread disease.

It is, of course, impossible to fully discuss how the works discussed in this thesis fit into the broader historical context of Shakespearean performance during mass disease outbreaks without first establishing that historical framework. Leeds Barroll's *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare's Theatre: The Stuart Years* serves as a foundation for the historical contexts in which Shakespeare's plays were written, especially with regard to the plague. The book is largely a historical account rather than textual or performance analysis, but it provides a framework for the chronology of the plague outbreaks and the effects that they likely had on Shakespeare's writing and the earliest performances of his plays – including theatre closures and social distancing, both of which have clear parallels with safety practices during COVID-19. In addition, Rebecca Totaro's *The Plague in Print: Essential Elizabethan Sources, 1558-1603* provides a collection of early modern writings related to the plague. Although the book contains relatively little textual analysis and mainly consists of primary source-texts, it does provide a snapshot of popular writings on the plague.

Margaret Healy's 2001 monograph *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England* provides another comprehensive account of the impact that illness and contagion have had on early modern literature, including Shakespeare. Healy primarily focuses on syphilis, the bubonic plague, and "the replete, costive, humoral body",⁶⁹ which she classifies as "the disease states which caused the most ink to flow in the Renaissance".⁷⁰ Healy begins with an overview of various historical understandings of disease and contagion in the centuries leading up to the Renaissance, including the humoral model first seen in ancient Greece and Galen's "seeds of plague" theory (later expanded upon by Fracastoro)⁷¹ that suggests that diseases are caused by external factors that unbalance the humours.⁷² Healy also discusses the shift in public policies regarding disease that occurred around Shakespeare's era, including the shift from viewing disease prevention as a personal responsibility toward the idea that public health is the public's responsibility. These associations between contagion, responsibility, and shame (if those responsibilities are not met) are comparable to sentiments expressed by the public during

⁶⁹ Margaret Healy, *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England*. (Palgrave, 2001), 13.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷¹ Vivian Nutton, "The Reception of Fracastoro's Theory of Contagion: The Seed That Fell among Thorns?", *Osiris* 6 (1990), 200-201, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/301787>.

⁷² Healy, *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England*, 21.

the COVID-19 lockdowns, and demonstrate one of the many parallels between disease in Shakespeare's era and today.

Contagion and the Shakespearean Stage, edited by Darryl Chalk and Mary Floyd-Wilson, is an edited essay collection that analyses Shakespearean and other early modern drama through the lens of early modern understandings of contagion and disease. Published in 2019, the book very narrowly predates the pandemic's onset—which positions it as a benchmark for how these ideas were presented prior to COVID-19, and as a point of comparison when discussing how COVID-19 may have changed, challenged, or confirmed these views. The book is especially focused on how theatre was often viewed as a place of widespread contagion during the early modern era (much as it was during the COVID-19 lockdowns) —even before the advent of modern germ theory.⁷³ In the introduction, Chalk and Floyd-Wilson argue that the discussion of early modern contagion should be moved “well beyond the plague and into a much more comprehensive consideration of the extensive array of pathological states understood to be communicable in early modern culture”.⁷⁴ Though the book was published just before the start of lockdown, and therefore could not take COVID-19 into account when discussing this idea, it still lays a framework for discussion and analysis of future pandemics including COVID-19.

In particular, the volume's third section, titled “Viral Ideas,” primarily focuses on social contagion (as opposed to a more literal definition of contagion as it pertains to physical diseases). This section, particularly Clifford Werior's essay “The Hungry Meme and Political Contagion in *Coriolanus*,” is reminiscent of Aebischer's idea of the ways in which Shakespeare “went viral” as a cultural phenomenon during the pandemic, and echoes Susca's concept of Shakespeare's “meminess”.⁷⁵ Werior defines memes in this context as “possessing a selfism momentum which propels them to survive in human minds and associated cultural encodings”,⁷⁶ and argues that memes spread in a way that is comparable to biological processes similar to DNA replication or germs. (Chalk uses the plot of *Coriolanus* as an example of these “viral ideas” and how they can spread.) When presented in the context of COVID-19, and especially alongside Aebischer and Susca's

⁷³ Darryl Chalk and Mary Floyd-Wilson, Introduction to *Contagion and the Shakespearean Stage*, eds. Chalk and Floyd-Wilson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 2.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁵ Susca, “To Meme or Not to Meme, and to Do So During a Pandemic”, 216.

⁷⁶ Clifford Werior, “The Hungry Meme and Political Contagion in *Coriolanus*,” in *Contagion and the Shakespearean Stage*, eds. Chalk and Floyd-Wilson, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 191.

ideas on Shakespeare's viral nature, these ideas add to the narrative surrounding the prevalence of Shakespearean works in online communities during lockdown. This section also includes J.F. Bernard's chapter "Hamlet's Story / Stories of Hamlet: Shakespeare's Theatre, the Plague, and Contagious Storytelling", which is also comparable to Aebischer's notion of "viral Shakespeare." Like Aebischer, Bernard argues that *Hamlet* has become "viral" in the Western cultural lexicon in the centuries since its publication, most notably with regard to its "digital afterlife",⁷⁷ or its innumerable adaptations in the online space. The virtual adaptations of *Hamlet* discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis add to the online archive of *Hamlets* that Bernard describes.

Perhaps the most comprehensive firsthand account of *The Show Must Go Online*, its mission, and its creative process is *Innovation and Digital Theatremaking: Rethinking Theatre with The Show Must Go Online*, co-written by the project's creator and director Rob Myles alongside academic and theatre-maker Valerie Clayman Pye. The book is intended to serve not only as a retrospective of the project's creative process from its initial conception through its conclusion, but also as a guide for future theatre-makers who wish to take on projects with a similar mission or process. The book begins by outlining the project's mission of inclusivity and accessibility (exemplified by the project's slogan of "Shakespeare for everyone, for free, forever"), and explaining how the project was deliberately designed to incorporate those goals – including practical and logistical matters like funding, participant recruitment, and media coverage, as well as more abstract concepts such as how to define and create an intentional community, or how to use empathy as a source of inspiration and innovation. The book also discussed the rationale for choosing Shakespeare as the focus of the project, as well as how those plays fit into the sociopolitical climate of 2020 and 2021, stating that "Shakespeare is familiar, Shakespeare is malleable, and Shakespeare is resilient".⁷⁸ The book also includes sections written by other participants in the project, including casting director Sydney Aldridge and producer Sarah Peachey, presenting a comprehensive overview of all angles of the project. Finally, the book's appendices include a collection of samples of tools and materials used by the production team and the shows' casts, including sample emails sent out to participants, rehearsal schedules, and call sheets – invaluable resources

⁷⁷ J.F. Bernard, "Hamlet's Story / Stories of Hamlet: Shakespeare's Theatre, the Plague, and Contagious Storytelling," in *Contagion and the Shakespearean Stage*, eds. Chalk and Floyd-Wilson, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 225.

⁷⁸ Myles and Pye, *Innovation and Digital Theatremaking*, 35.

for people looking to produce similar works, and also (for the purposes of this thesis), a glimpse into the practical components of how the project was run.

This thesis will expand on the existing research in this area by not only analysing the utility and efficacy of *Sofa Shakespeare* and *The Show Must Go Online* within the context of lockdown, but also by positioning these works within the broader historical framework of Shakespearean performance in the virtual space, as well as the history of Shakespearean performance during mass disease outbreaks. COVID-19 was an unprecedented situation in many ways, but the productions discussed in this thesis demonstrate ways of working that are simultaneously new and grounded in historical precedent. By recontextualising these works in this way, this thesis will build on the existing history of Shakespearean performance and pandemics, and will establish the ways in which COVID-19 both adds to and changes this narrative. This thesis will demonstrate how Shakespearean works produced during lockdown have added to an enduring legacy of humanity using Shakespeare as a means of persisting and reclaiming their narratives during times of mass trauma.

Chapter 1: Plagues Then and Now

I. Introduction

In order to adequately discuss and analyse the case studies of Shakespearean performances during COVID-19 that will be covered in later chapters, it is first necessary to contextualise COVID-19 within the broader historical framework of Shakespearean performance during disease outbreaks. This chapter will primarily focus on COVID-19 as it relates to the bubonic plague, which saw two major outbreaks in London during Shakespeare's lifetime and is frequently alluded to in his writing. The history of Shakespearean performance during disease outbreaks sets a precedent for performances during COVID-19, and our contemporary understanding of the plague informs modern-day perceptions of what it means to create theatre in times of mass illness and death. However, differences between the two diseases (both in terms of their respective historical eras and the symptoms and mortality rates of the illnesses themselves) differentiate Shakespearean works created during COVID-19 from their predecessors in terms of moral implications suggested by the productions, the visual language used in the productions, and the use of alternate performance spaces during widespread theatre closures.

As with COVID-19, outbreaks of the bubonic plague led to widespread mandatory quarantines and lockdown measures, which in turn assigned moral value to otherwise innocuous acts that could potentially spread disease, as well as social stigmas around those who contracted or spread it. Additionally, early modern understandings of medicine and epidemiology often suggested that it was the immoral activity itself that caused the disease, or that people who participated in immoral acts were more likely to become ill. This chapter will begin with a discussion of these moral implications, and how the moralisation of disease appears in both early modern accounts of the plague and contemporary works produced during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Although COVID-19 is in many ways comparable to the bubonic plague, the two diseases are of course not interchangeable, and their respective symptoms, mortality rates, and treatments impact not only their effect on the human body, but also their presence and portrayal in artistic works and popular culture. In this chapter, I will argue that the bubonic plague's "visibility" compared to COVID-19—in other words, the degree to which its symptoms alter the appearance of the human body, as well as the likelihood of

an uninfected person to directly witness the disease's effects on those infected—heavily impacted its portrayal in literary and artistic works at the time and, in turn, the public's perception of the disease. Because the symptoms of COVID-19 are much less likely to drastically alter an individual's appearance, and severe cases (including those that led to fatalities) were typically treated in hospitals with very limited access to visitors, the visual language of works portraying COVID-19 are markedly different from those portraying the bubonic plague. This chapter will explore the respective “visibility” of both diseases, and how it impacted works created during both the bubonic plague and COVID-19 lockdowns.

This chapter will conclude with a comparison between theatre closures during plague outbreaks in early modern London, and the recent theatre closures that occurred during the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. In both instances, theatres were closed as a preventative measure against the large crowds created by live audiences (and the diseases likely to spread in said crowds), which led to further moralisation of the act of seeing a play. In the case of COVID-19, this moralisation was largely due to the ethics of participating in an event known to contribute to the spread of the disease—a sentiment that was also common during the London plague outbreaks, in addition to moral and ethical concerns about the plays themselves. In both cases, the sudden lack of live performance venues highlighted their importance as community-building spaces, and the necessity of community during difficult times. Additionally, however, both sets of circumstances led to increased accessibility for audiences who may not otherwise have reliable access to theatrical performances: touring productions in Shakespeare's case, and online productions during COVID-19.

II. Plagues, Morality, and Shame

Modern-day germ theory has disproved the idea that immoral thoughts or acts can cause physical illnesses without any other physiological cause, and we now know that contracting an illness is not a reflection of a person's character. However, our enhanced understanding of contagious diseases and how they spread has led to a new cultural approach to the connection between illness and morality, and this became especially apparent during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Although there was, at first, a limited understanding of precisely how COVID-19 was transmitted or what the most effective means of protection were, health experts agreed that social distancing, frequent hand washing, and wearing masks were necessary mitigation measures—at least until there was

a better understanding of how the disease could spread. Although governments could enforce safety measures such as closing venues where large volumes of people gathered or restricting the occupancy of indoor spaces, individuals still had a personal responsibility to limit their in-person contact with others. For that reason, an individual's choices such as whether or not to wear a mask, dining in restaurants (and whether or not to sit indoors), or visiting with people outside of one's household became not just a matter of personal risk, but of public safety and commitment to the common good. Rather than the early modern understanding of immoral acts being a root cause of disease, the inverse became true: acts that were proven or suspected to cause the spread of COVID-19 were viewed by many as immoral by virtue of the fact that they can spread contagion.

The London plague outbreaks of the 16th and 17th centuries also saw a conflation between literal contagion and social contagion when it came to mitigating the spread of the plague. It was common for large public gathering spaces such as theatres to close during outbreaks, although the rationale for doing so varied: some public officials (correctly) believed that crowded spaces were vectors for the plague due to the congestion of bodies, while others believed that such public assemblies were immoral and invited the plague not through the spread of germs but through the spread of harmful ideologies.⁷⁹ Because theatres were often viewed as places where immoral acts took place and immoral ideas were spread, theatregoers could be viewed as complicit in encouraging diseases to spread—whether that meant disease of the body, disease of the mind and spirit, or both, with the latter manifesting itself as the former. The physician Stephen Gosson's 1582 publication *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* classifies the theatre as a site of moral contagion that “infects” audiences with dangerous ideas, transmitted via the content of the plays themselves as well as through the collective experience of being part of an audience.⁸⁰ The collective nature of the theatre is the thing that makes it dangerous—a sentiment that carries over into 2020, albeit for reasons more grounded in germ theory than social contagion. Jenny Votava also notes in a chapter on *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* that part of Gosson's objection to the theatre was that “[s]eeing a play cannot be done in isolation; rather, one ‘thrusts’ oneself into a larger company—a tactile verb that suggests the forceful physical contact that results from close proximity”.⁸¹ This sentiment

⁷⁹ Ernest B. Gilman, *Plague Writing in Early Modern England*. (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 131.

⁸⁰ Jennie Votava, “Comedy, the Senses, and Social Contagion in *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* and *The Comedy of Errors*”, in *Contagion and the Shakespearean Stage*, eds. Darryl Chalk and Mary Floyd-Wilson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 25-33.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

was true during Gosson's lifetime, but complicated by modern advances in technology that allow theatre to take place without physical proximity to others.

Early modern understandings of contagion—particularly some of the ideas that ultimately led to the discovery of germ theory—also changed the public's perception of how diseases are spread and how it relates to interpersonal interactions. In the 1530s, roughly sixty years prior to the beginning of Shakespeare's writing career, the Italian doctor and poet Girolamo Fracastoro published several writings that expanded on the ancient Greek physician and philosopher Galen's idea of "seeds of disease," or the theory that disease could be spread from person to person via tiny "seeds" that could infiltrate the body. According to Fracastoro, a disease's transmissibility and severity was determined by the seeds' strength and viscosity (i.e. their ability to "stick" to their host), and could be spread via direct contact or across distances, depending on the type of seed and its properties.⁸² This contrasted from the then-prevalent theory of "miasma", or the idea that diseases spread from toxic or unclean air, and attempted to more directly address the reasons why some diseases are more contagious than others, or how diseases could spread from one person to another. Although Fracastoro's model was, of course, not entirely accurate, it did get somewhat closer to modern-day germ theory than many of the prevailing theories at the time, and a plague outbreak in Venice in 1555-1557 managed to avoid a relatively high number of deaths by implementing quarantine measures based partly on Fracastoro's theories.⁸³ Because Fracastoro's theory was focused on person-to-person transmission rather than environmental factors as with the miasma theory, the importance of isolating or quarantining infected individuals became increasingly apparent.

Thus, the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries saw a shift toward treating disease prevention as a social welfare and public safety issue rather than a purely personal responsibility⁸⁴, which is reflected in both writing and public policy during this time. The medical writer James Manning believed that anyone who knowingly spreads the plague to others should be severely punished, and in 1604 argued that "May not they be condemned for murtherers, which having plague soares will presse into companies to infect others, or

⁸² Vivian Nutton, "The Reception of Fracastoro's Theory of Contagion: The Seed That Fell among Thorns?", *Osiris* 6 (1990), 200-201, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/301787>.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁸⁴ Margaret Healy, *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England*. (Palgrave, 2001), 38-40.

willfully pollute the ayre, or other meanes, which others are daily to use, and live by?”⁸⁵ The same year, a law was passed in London that allowed for the execution of plague victims who knowingly and carelessly spread the disease to others, although no one ever actually faced the death penalty on this count.⁸⁶ These measures often disproportionately targeted the poor, who were thought to be the primary spreaders of the plague and other diseases⁸⁷ –although, as Healy notes, many diseases (such as syphilis) were equally prevalent among the wealthy, but wealthy people tended to go to greater lengths to disguise the symptoms of what they considered to be a shameful and embarrassing disease.⁸⁸

On this note, the conflation of illness and morality during this period readily translated into a conflation between illness and shame. This sense of shame forms the basis for what Sheldon Watts refers to as the “disease Construct”,⁸⁹ or the public’s (not necessarily accurate) perception of what demographics (in terms of race, religion, or socioeconomic status) were most susceptible to contracting or spreading certain diseases. These Constructs inevitably led to social stigmas around those who contracted the diseases in question, to the point that many were (and in many cases, still are) hesitant to seek treatment. For example, even today, “Construct leprosy” is so heavily ingrained in the social narrative that many people who contract it do not seek treatment in time to prevent permanent injury or death, despite the fact that leprosy can now be cured if caught in time.⁹⁰ Watts primarily focuses on leprosy, malaria, syphilis, and yellow fever as case studies for the idea of the disease Construct; however, I argue that both the bubonic plague and COVID-19 share these social Constructs and stigmas as well, due to this aforementioned moralisation surrounding the contraction and prevention of these illnesses. On a similar note, modern-day understandings of early modern plague outbreaks and what they were like are not always grounded in history, since the contemporary “popular science” narrative of the plague is not always entirely accurate—and these inaccurate narratives became especially prevalent during COVID-19. For example, the idea that Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* while in quarantine during a bubonic

⁸⁵ James Manning, *A New Booke Intituled I am for you all, Complexions castle* (1604), cited in Healy, *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England*, 39.

⁸⁶ Healy, *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England*, 39.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸⁹ Sheldon Watts, *Epidemics and History: Disease, Power and Imperialism*. (Yale University Press, 1997), xv.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, xv.

plague outbreak was widely circulated during the COVID-19 lockdowns (often in a humorous format that jokingly implores the reader to consider how productive they've been during their own experience of lockdown), despite being not entirely factually true. The idea that people were somehow more productive during early modern plague outbreaks (or perhaps less distressed by the idea of quarantine, or more desensitised to the prospect of serious illness or death) is one that seems to have resonated with audiences in 2020, even though historical records strongly indicate that this was not the case.

The idea of “Construct COVID-19” is somewhat less straightforward, since we do not yet have the centuries of history that grounded our public perception and cultural understanding of the plague (or leprosy, or syphilis, or most other widespread contagious diseases). However, there are already several emerging narratives about who gets COVID-19 (and who dies from it), as well as who spreads it and the moral implications associated with that. Though there is a better scientific understanding of COVID-19 and its transmission now than there was in 2020, many of the original (not entirely accurate) assumptions surrounding the disease still remain—and discounting these ideas has proven difficult, despite the scientific data that backs up current understandings. For instance, in the earliest days of the pandemic, it was believed that only elderly people or people with pre-existing health conditions were at risk for dying of COVID-19, and while it is indeed true that those demographics face significantly higher risks, anyone who contracts the disease (especially without a vaccine) is at risk of serious complications that can lead to death or long-term health problems.

III. Illness and Visibility

Symptoms of the bubonic plague are not only highly unpleasant for those infected, but also highly visible to outside observers. The bubonic plague, or *Yersinia pestis* (often abbreviated to *Y. pestis*), is demarcated by the presence of buboes, or swollen areas around the lymph nodes. These can develop into sores and leak pus, which can then develop into gangrene. (This is how the disease's colloquial name “black plague” was derived, since gangrene causes the skin to turn black around the infected area.⁹¹) Although the disease causes other symptoms (including fever, vomiting, and delirium among others), many of which are also highly dangerous to the health of the infected

⁹¹ “Bubonic Plague,” Cleveland Clinic, June 17, 2021, <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/21590-bubonic-plague>

person, these sores are what differentiates the bubonic plague from other types of plague and other deadly illnesses, and are frequently alluded to in writings and artworks of the early modern era. A woodcut from 1569 entitled *The Daunce and Song of Death* depicts a number of people (including a king, a beggar, a child, and an old man) being led to their death by dancing skeletons, and although the plague is not directly referenced in the image's captions, the central figure depicting "Sycknes Deathes minstrel" (or "Sickness, Death's minstrel") is covered in sores.⁹² An image from George Thomson's 1666 book *Loimotomia, or, The pest anatomized* depicts a dissection of a deceased plague victim, who is similarly marked by sores on their legs and upper chest.⁹³ These sores make the image's subject immediately recognisable as a plague victim, unlike other illnesses that may not alter the victim's appearance to the same extent. Early modern writers often referred to these markings as "tokens"⁹⁴ or "God's tokens"⁹⁵, highlighting their role as visual signifiers of the plague's presence in the body. From a cultural perspective, the bubonic plague's visibility is what sets it apart from other contagious illnesses of the day.

⁹² J. Awdely, *The Daunce and Song of Death* (1569), accessed via ProQuest, <https://www.proquest.com/books/daunce-song-death/docview/2248557647/se-2?accountid=14404>

⁹³ George Thomson, *Loimotomia, or, The Pest anatomized*. (1666), accessed via ProQuest, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2240924741/12075699?sourcetype=Books>

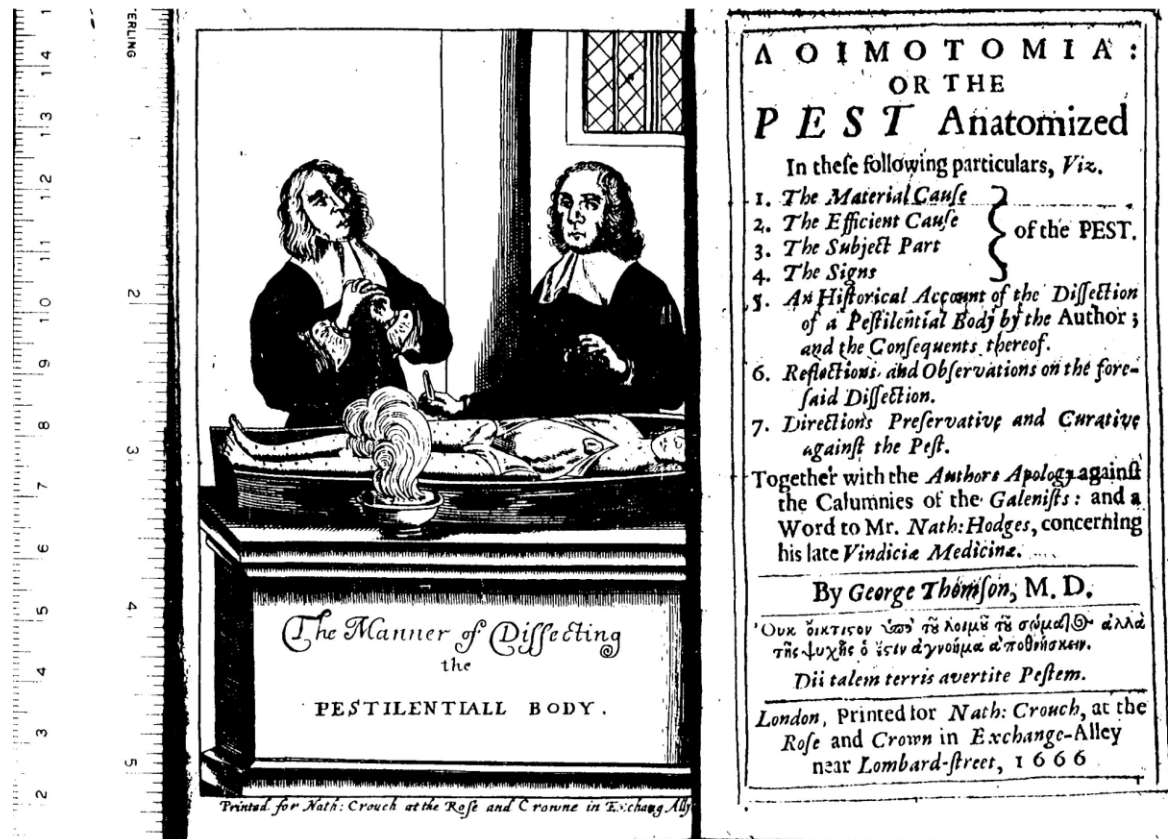
⁹⁴ Thomas Dekker, *Newes from Graves-end* (1604), cited in Healy, *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England*, 50.

⁹⁵ Thomas Lodge, *A Treatise of the Plague* (1603), cited in Healy, *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England*, 51.



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Image description: *The Daunce and Song of Death* (1569), as described in the paragraph above. (Source: www.proquest.com/books/daunce-song-death/docview/2248557647/se-2?accountid=14404)



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Image description: Title page of George Thomson's *Loimotomia, or, The pest anatomized* (1666), as described in the paragraph above. (Source:

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2240924741/12075699?sourcetype=Books>)

The plague—and the imagery associated with its symptoms and the social environment it creates—also appears quite frequently in Shakespeare's writings. In Act II, scene 4 of *King Lear*, for example, Lear insults his daughter Goneril by calling her “a boil, a plague-sore, or embossed carbuncle, in my corrupted blood”,⁹⁶ bringing to mind extremely graphic imagery that was undoubtedly familiar to early modern audiences. As with the visual artworks discussed in the previous paragraph, Lear's language explicitly describes the plague (as opposed to illness in the more general sense), and indicates this not only with the use of the word “plague,” but with explicit descriptions of the disease's visual effects on the human body. Because the play was first performed in 1606, not long after the severe London plague outbreak in 1603-1604, the imagery conveyed in this line

⁹⁶ William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (Arden Shakespeare Third Series), ed. R.A. Foakes (Bloomsbury, 1997), II.iv.18-20.

likely elicited a visceral response in early modern audiences and made the insult toward Goneril appear all the more offensive. *Macbeth*, also first performed in 1606, lacks direct references to the bubonic plague specifically but contains imagery that reflects a disease-ridden world and the sense of imbalance that comes with it. In the play's opening scene, the three witches "hover through the fog and filthy air" (I.i.11-12), which suggests a disease-ridden environment and also brings to mind the "miasma" theory of classical through early modern medicine, or the belief that illnesses can be spread through toxic air. Later, in Act IV, scene 3, Malcolm describes a disease rampant in England that leaves its victims "All swoll'n and ulcerous".⁹⁷ Although Malcolm doesn't specify that the disease in question is the bubonic plague, the description of swelling and ulcers is in line with the plague's symptoms, as is the fact that the outbreak took place in England (much like the actual outbreak in London that had ended just two years prior). Again, this description of the plague highlights the bubonic plague's effect on the appearance of those afflicted, and creates imagery that was likely familiar to the play's earliest audiences.

Healy also notes that many of the early modern "plague pamphlets" published after the London plague outbreak of 1563 (including Thomas Dekker's *The Wonderfull Yeare* and *London Looke Backe*, William Bullein's *A Dialogue against the Fever Pestilence*, Simon Kellwaye's *A Defensative Against the Plague*, and Thomas Lodge's *A Treatise of the Plague*, among others) are especially graphic in their descriptions of the physical symptoms caused by the plague.⁹⁸ Dekker, for example, refers to the bubonic plague as the "purple plague" (in reference to the purple sores that appear near the infected lymph nodes, similar to the more common "black plague" phrasing), and describes plague victims' bodies as appearing similar to "speckled marble".⁹⁹ Bullein also describes the "foule bubo, antaxis and Carbuncles"¹⁰⁰ associated with the plague in graphic detail in a pamphlet written in 1564, a year after that initial outbreak, which Kellwaye describes as "Carbunkles and botches".¹⁰¹ The mental images invoked by these descriptions suggest that the imagery of plague-related injuries and infections weighed

⁹⁷ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (*Arden Shakespeare Second Series*), ed. Kenneth Muir (Bloomsbury, 1997), IV.iii.151.

⁹⁸ Healy, *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England*, 50-51.

⁹⁹ Dekker, *The Wonderfull yeare*, cited in Healy, *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England*, 50.

¹⁰⁰ William Bullein, *A Dialogue against the Fever Pestilence* (1564), cited in Healy, *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England*, 51.

¹⁰¹ Simon Kellwaye, *A Defensative Against the Plague* (1563), cited in Healy, *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England*, 51.

heavily on the minds of writers during this time, and were also familiar to readers who had directly witnessed the plague's effects on the body.

In contrast to this, Shakespearean works created during the COVID-19 lockdowns that are highlighted in this thesis do not tend to directly reference the symptoms of the disease. The conditions of lockdown and other preventative measures *are* frequently directly or indirectly referenced: for example, a clip from Sofa Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* uses a bottle of hand sanitiser in place of Juliet's bottle of poison (bringing to mind the frequent hand washing suggested by health authorities, as well as the hand sanitiser shortages in the early days of lockdown), and the entire format of *The Show Must Go Online* mirrors the structure of the Zoom meetings that were common while most workplaces were closed. Though both works contain visual or extratextual references that highlight themes of social isolation and disease prevention, there are few to no depictions of the disease itself. The disease exists as a looming threat in the background, held at bay by the preventative measures that are depicted in the works, but rarely brought to the forefront. While the works retain the references to disease that are in the text, the visual representations tend to highlight the conditions of lockdown, not the conditions of becoming ill. While early modern writers appear to have been heavily inspired by the visceral reaction to witnessing the effect of the plague on the human body, Shakespearean theatre-makers in 2020 and 2021 tended to focus more on the experiences of avoiding the disease and all that that entails. The visual language of these productions reflects the fact that symptoms of severe COVID-19 cases could typically only be seen behind closed doors, and those who were fortunate enough not to contract it (or to contract a mild or asymptomatic case) were more likely to be familiar with the conditions of quarantine than the conditions of the disease itself.

Even for those who managed to survive outbreaks of the bubonic plague without becoming infected, the possibility of contracting and subsequently dying from the disease was a very visible and tangible concept. If one person contracted the disease, their entire household had to quarantine, even those who were not infected. This is fairly similar to the quarantine guidelines during the COVID-19 lockdowns (the CDC initially recommended a 14-day quarantine for every exposure, even for people who weren't showing symptoms),¹⁰² but in the case of COVID-19, those with very severe infections

¹⁰² Zeke Miller, "CDC to shorten COVID-19 quarantine to 10 days, 7 with test," *Associated Press*, December 2, 2020, <https://apnews.com/cdc-to-shorten-covid-19-quarantine-to-10-days-7-with-test-fc8b8b93537033b749fb4900ee2027d5>.

were sent to hospitals for treatment. Conversely, during bubonic plague outbreaks, people who contracted the disease typically died at home, and often with their family members bearing witness. Gilman describes these domestic quarantines as “one of the few weapons available to public health authorities,” and says that “all [in the household] would be shut in under guard, the (temporarily) healthy as well as the stricken, to rot together”.¹⁰³ Even those who were lucky enough to survive these periods of enforced quarantine still had to watch as the infected members of the household succumbed to the illness—typically within eight days of the initial infection,¹⁰⁴ which could be as little as two days after symptom onset. During this period, healthy members of the household also had to live with the fear that they too would become infected (which was, in fact, very likely to happen). Gilman’s use of the word “weapon” here is a curious one, since enforced quarantines were more of a necessary public safety measure than a punishment or means of control—but it does reflect the moral implications often associated with infections and mitigation efforts discussed in the previous section.

Compared to the bubonic plague, the deaths caused by COVID-19 in parts of the world where lockdown was in effect were significantly less visible to the average person, aside from medical professionals working in hospitals. The pandemic itself was, of course, very visible—in the news, in social media posts, in the noticeably empty public spaces—but most people (aside from medical professionals working in hospitals) did not directly witness the deaths themselves. Due to the contagious nature of the disease, and the lack of understanding (at the time) of how it could spread, people whose infections were severe enough to be hospitalised were placed in isolation, often with no visits from family members or other loved ones permitted. Videos of dying patients in COVID-19 wards saying goodbye to their loved ones via FaceTime or other video messaging platforms were a common sight on social media during this time. A news clip from Houston, Texas in April 2020 depicts doctors and nurses in a unit treating COVID-19 patients, a job that involved not just medical care, but also ensuring that patients were able to connect virtually with their families and other loved ones in their final days. One hospital worker describes facilitating a FaceTime call between a dying patient and his family, saying that, “Today we were able to call [a patient’s daughter] before we removed the bi-pap [i.e. life support], and she told him the most wonderful things and what a

¹⁰³ Gilman, *Plague Writing in Early Modern England*, 36.

¹⁰⁴ Healy, *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England*, 51.

wonderful father he was”¹⁰⁵ –all via a brief video call rather than in person. Although the impact of the disease was apparent to anyone living in an area where lockdowns were enforced, the deaths themselves typically happened behind closed doors, and usually with only medical professionals physically present.

The prevalence (or lack thereof) of asymptomatic cases of the plague and COVID-19 also reflect the “visibility” of both diseases. As Ernest B. Gilman discusses in *Plague Writing in Early Modern England*, symptoms of the bubonic plague showed up within only a few days of becoming infected, and those symptoms were immediately recognisable as the plague and not some other illness.¹⁰⁶ (Modern-day testing measures have confirmed that asymptomatic cases of the bubonic plague are exceedingly rare or potentially non-existent without the use of prophylactic drugs.¹⁰⁷ The infection’s incubation period can be anywhere from two to eight days prior to the onset of symptoms,¹⁰⁸ but symptoms will virtually always develop following this period.) Gilman presents this information in contrast to HIV, which can go undetected for months before causing symptoms, and people who have received a diagnosis can remain symptom-free for years or decades with proper treatment. (Furthermore, advances in treatment options since the book’s publication in 2009 make this even more true now than it was at the time.) Gilman points out that “The fear that some covert operatives might, from whatever motives, intentionally spread the infection [i.e. HIV] recalls the paranoia in Italy during plague times, when it was believed that *untori*, ‘anointers,’ might be daubing some pestiferous liquid on benches and walls”.¹⁰⁹ Although neither of these situations was actually happening on a broad scale (we now know that the plague is spread by fleas, not *untori* or other human-made means, and it is far more likely for HIV to be spread by lack of awareness rather than malicious intent), it is true that diseases that can spread undetected can inspire a sense of distrust among the communities in which they exist.

COVID-19 presents a unique case study for this concept, due to the nature of its symptoms and the degree to which they can go undetected. There is a massive disparity in

¹⁰⁵ KHOU 11, “Angels in blue: Nurses become family for dying COVID-19 patients”, YouTube, 14 April 2020, <https://youtu.be/DVENrwO1DII?si=HyXJ1Gd8DOsU3JF9>

¹⁰⁶ Gilman 2009, 7.

¹⁰⁷ Min Li, Yajun Song, Bei Li, Zuyun Wang, Ronghai Yang, Lingxiao Jiang, and Ruifu Yang, “Asymptomatic *Yersinia pestis* Infection, China,” *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 11, no. 9 (2005): 1494-1496, accessed September 6, 2024, doi: 10.3201/eid1109.041147.

¹⁰⁸ “Signs and Symptoms of Plague,” United States Centers for Disease Control, last modified May 15, 2024, <https://www.cdc.gov/plague/signs-symptoms/index.html>

¹⁰⁹ Gilman, *Plague Writing in Early Modern England*, 7.

terms of symptom severity for those infected: the disease can be fatal or permanently life-altering, but many people display symptoms no worse than those of a common cold, or no symptoms at all. Furthermore, COVID-19 symptoms can be easily mistaken for the symptoms of other common viruses, and vice versa. While there are certain symptoms that are very characteristic of COVID-19 (e.g. excessive coughing, fever, low blood oxygen levels, and loss of taste and smell), not all people who display those symptoms necessarily have COVID-19, and not all people who have COVID-19 necessarily display those symptoms. Especially in the early days of the pandemic, before tests were widely available in the way they are today, people had to rely on this (largely unreliable) list of symptoms to determine whether they were likely to be infected—and even then it was impossible to know definitively, due to the high number of asymptomatic cases. (In countries such as the United States, where tests are still prohibitively expensive for many, this continues to be the case for those with limited access to tests. Furthermore, the high rate of false negatives on tests—up to fifty-eight percent, according to one study¹¹⁰ – mean that it is still impossible to know definitively that a person is not infected.) For those reasons, in addition to the fact that modern medicine has taught us that one does not need to show symptoms to be contagious, there was a widespread fear in the early days of the pandemic (and now, to some extent) that anyone and everyone could potentially be a carrier for the virus—and those fears were at least somewhat grounded in reality, given the prevalence of asymptomatic cases. It would be an exaggeration to call COVID-19 an invisible disease, since the symptoms can have a profound effect on the human body to the extent that others would notice – but compared to the bubonic plague, COVID-19 is much more capable of passing by unnoticed. By the same token, the works discussed in this thesis focus less on the physical effects of the disease, and more on its effect that preventative measures had on people’s daily lives.

IV. Theatre Closures

On March 11th, 2020, Broadway theatres made the announcement that they would be closing their doors indefinitely due COVID-19, which the World Health Organisation had officially declared a pandemic just one day prior. Theatres in the West End made a similar announcement on the 16th, and over the course of the early weeks of lockdown,

¹¹⁰ Valentina Pecoraro, Antonella Negro, Tommaso Pirotti, and Tommaso Trenti, “Estimate false-negative RT-PCR rates for SARS-CoV-2. A systematic review and meta-analysis,” *European Journal of Clinical Investigation* 52, no. 2 (2022), accessed 7 September 2024, doi: 10.1111/eci.13706

live performance venues closed en masse all over the world in areas where lockdowns were enforced. While theatre-makers and audiences were initially hopeful that the closures wouldn't last long, both Broadway and the West End would remain shuttered for well over a year.

Although these theatre closures may seem unprecedented to a contemporary audience, COVID-19 is of course far from being the first time in history that theatres have had to close due to widespread disease outbreaks, and in fact, this practice was relatively common in Shakespeare's day. London playhouses were closed due a plague outbreak for the first time in 1563, a year before Shakespeare was born,¹¹¹ and there were two other major outbreaks during his lifetime in 1593 and 1603.¹¹² By the 1603 outbreak, protocols had been set in place in London to close the theatres if plague deaths exceeded a certain number, although this exact number appears to have varied by quite a lot: in 1604 the number was set at thirty plague deaths in London per week, but a document from 1603 suggests that Shakespeare's company was not permitted to perform during a week when only eighteen deaths in London were attributed to the plague.¹¹³ (Given the fact that plague deaths in London in 1603 peaked at 3,035 in a single week,¹¹⁴ this threshold was relatively low and indicates an abundance of caution by London authorities.) Around two decades earlier, in 1584, London authorities also suggested that theatre closures should not be determined based on weekly deaths, since living people who display symptoms are actually the ones who spread the disease—but while this idea is essentially scientifically correct, it does not appear to be reflected in the 1603-1604 regulations.¹¹⁵

Although these theatre closures were largely based on rightful concerns about diseases being much more likely to spread in crowded areas, this was not the only reason for concern at the time. As previously mentioned, theatres were thought by many to be places where harmful ideologies were spread, which could in turn lead to disease—which could manifest itself in either actual physical symptoms, or, in a more spiritual sense, corruption of the mind (the latter of which might lead to the former). In *Plays Confuted in Five Actions*, Gosson not only argues that attending plays is morally wrong, but that the sensory onslaught of sights, sounds, and smells that one would likely find at an early

¹¹¹ Leeds Barroll, *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare's Theater: The Stuart Years*. (Cornell University Press, 1991), 97.

¹¹² Gilman, *Plague Writing in Early Modern England*, 35.

¹¹³ Barroll, *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare's Theater*, 98-99.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

modern London playhouse are physically harmful to the body and spirit. Gosson refers to the theatre as the “chair of pestilence”,¹¹⁶ suggesting that plays are at fault for physical illnesses, and argues that “that which entereth into us by the eyes and ears must be digested by the spirit”,¹¹⁷ indicating that sensory information is processed in a manner similar to food being digested—and thus has the potential to harm in the same way as eating something unhealthy or toxic. He also argues that the visual spectacle of plays is harmful to viewers, since the immediacy of viewing an image onstage is overwhelming to the mind and less wholesome than obtaining information through reading and the personal reflection that that entails. Jennifer Waldron states in her article “Gaping Upon Plays: Shakespeare, Gosson, and the Reformation of Vision” that Gosson believes that “vision allows a directness and power of communication that is both suspect and enviable”¹¹⁸: in other words, the visual aspects of theatrical performance may be enticing to the viewer, but the fact that they are capable of enticing an entire audience is part of what makes them so dangerous. (Waldron also points out that, as a former playwright, Gosson was likely also keenly aware of the power he was losing by no longer having his words recited in front of an audience.¹¹⁹) For Gosson, theatre’s multi-sensory nature makes it akin to a contagious disease, because sensory information can “infect” the body in the same way an illness can. Jennie Votava posits that Shakespeare likely also believed in the “contagious” nature of multi-sensory experiences, but for him, it was not a danger but a positive aspect of the art form. According to Votava, “For both [Shakespeare and Gosson], contagion is a way of understanding on a physiological level the power of theater to forge human connections through the five senses”.¹²⁰ To Gosson, this was a potential means of spiritual corruption that could lead to physical harm, but for Shakespeare, it was a means of connecting to one another through a shared sensory experience.

The aforementioned communal nature of theatre was also a subject of debate during Shakespeare’s era. Many early modern writers (likely including Shakespeare)

¹¹⁶ Stephen Gosson, *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* (1582), cited in Tonya Pollard, *Shakespeare’s Theatre: A Sourcebook* (Blackwell, 2004), 91.

¹¹⁷ Gosson, *Plays Confuted in Five Actions*, cited in Pollard, *Shakespeare’s Theatre*, 92.

¹¹⁸ Waldron, Jennifer, “Gaping Upon Plays: Shakespeare, Gosson, and the Reformation of Vision,” in *Critical Matrix* 12, no. 1-2 (2001), n.p., <https://www.proquest.com/docview/89070585/fulltext/9C518B462A424FAAPQ/1?accountid=14404&source=Scholarly%20Journals>

¹¹⁹ Waldron, “Gaping Upon Plays”, n.p.

¹²⁰ Votava, “Comedy, the Senses, and Social Contagion in *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* and *The Comedy of Errors*”, 26.

believed strongly in the positive health effects of these communal experiences—for example, according to the author and medical writer Robert Burton, the laughter and enjoyment that come from seeing plays (especially comedies) were believed to provide significant health benefits.¹²¹ For Gosson and others, however, the communal nature of theatrical performance presents an additional danger, both morally and epidemiologically. Gosson refers to the actors and audience collectively as an “assembly of wicked worldlings”¹²² whose proximity to one another can readily lead to the sharing of harmful ideas that corrupt the body and spirit. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, health officials in London during Shakespeare’s day (correctly) saw the connection between large crowds and the spread of contagious illnesses, and introduced legislation accordingly. Votava balances these two ideas by arguing that “Contagion is the ever-present flipside of community, and while theater cannot protect one from contracting or dying of the plague or syphilis, it might provide some of the human connections that make an all-too-temporary life worthwhile”.¹²³ Live theatre may be potentially dangerous during disease outbreaks, but community (whether it comes from live theatre or elsewhere) is arguably more necessary than ever during times of mass tragedy.

This juxtaposition between theatre as a communal gathering space and theatre as a disease vector was also highly prevalent during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Theatre closures were, of course, a necessary measure to prevent the spread of a highly contagious disease that doctors knew relatively little about at the time. However, during this time of mass social isolation, the loss of communal spaces such as theatres were keenly felt by many, and the benefits to physical health that the closures provided also came at the detriment of many people’s mental health. Like the early modern writers such as Burton who believed in the healing abilities of enjoying oneself, contemporary audiences often view theatrical spaces as venues for the interpersonal connections necessary to maintain one’s mental health. However, live performance venues (especially indoor theatres) were also seen as potentially dangerous due to the crowds they drew. Projects such as *The Show Must Go Online* and *Sofa Shakespeare* were both presented as opportunities to balance both of these very pressing but competing needs: they allowed audience members

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹²² Gosson, *Plays Confuted in Five Actions*, cited in Pollard, *Shakespeare’s Theatre*, 91.

¹²³ Votava, “Comedy, the Senses, and Social Contagion in *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* and *The Comedy of Errors*”, 38.

to have the experience of watching a performance together without the potential risk of being in a crowded space.

Though Shakespeare's company typically performed in London, plague outbreaks (and the theatre closures that ensued) occasionally necessitated trips outside the city to perform in areas less impacted by the disease. For example, historical records suggest that Shakespeare's company likely performed in Bath, Coventry, and Shrewsbury during outbreaks in London around 1603, and then in Oxford while London playhouses were closed again in 1605.¹²⁴ These tours were done as a necessity to keep the company in business while London playhouses were closed, but they presented a unique opportunity for people living outside London to see Shakespeare's company perform—an opportunity that they may not have ever had if not for the plague closures. Though the circumstances under which these tours occurred were very tragic, they did allow for Shakespeare's company to perform for a wider audience than they otherwise might have.

Although COVID-19 was far too widespread for these types of tours to happen safely, the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 did allow for increased accessibility to theatrical performances. Because most theatrical performances during lockdown were streamed online, anyone with an Internet connection could access them from anywhere in the world, thus minimising geographical barriers to seeing live theatre. Additionally, because the productions were designed to be watched from the viewer's home, they were accessible to viewers with physical disabilities or sensory needs that might make seeing live performances difficult. The productions largely reduced financial constraints on audience members as well: although some companies still charged an "admission" fee for online performances, both *The Show Must Go Online* and *Sofa Shakespeare* were free for viewers (and remain free to watch on YouTube to this day). (*The Show Must Go Online* did raise money via a Patreon page where viewers could pay a monthly fee in exchange for access to additional footage and behind-the-scenes content, but participation was purely optional and the plays themselves were always free.) As with the tours outside of London during plague outbreaks in Shakespeare's era, theatre closures during the COVID-19 lockdowns allowed for accessibility to a larger audience who may not otherwise have many opportunities to see Shakespearean theatre being performed. Of course, my intent is not to argue that this increased accessibility was worth the cost of lives lost to COVID-19 or the bubonic plague. Rather, I argue that these tragic

¹²⁴ Barroll, *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare's Theatre*, 107-109; 131-132.

circumstances presented an opportunity to reconsider what barriers may be in place to certain audience members, and how theatre-makers might use the strategies developed during these times to increase accessibility even when public health circumstances don't necessitate it.

V. Conclusion

Although COVID-19 and its effect on the theatre industry may seem unprecedented to a contemporary audience, Shakespearean performance during widespread disease outbreaks dates back to some of the plays' earliest performances. In fact, contagion is a crucial component of the plays' history, since the plague was such a constant presence in early modern London. Modern technology may have allowed the plays to reach a much wider audience than in Shakespeare's era, but the act of performing Shakespeare while theatres remain closed is not a new phenomenon. By continuing to perform these plays despite the challenges presented by COVID-19, theatre-makers in 2020 and 2021 have contributed towards a rich history that dates back hundreds of years—and will likely continue, since the next major pandemic could happen at any time.

Chapter 2: Crowdsourcing Community in Early Lockdown: *Sofa Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*

I. Introduction

On March 15th, 2020, just four days after COVID-19 was officially declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization,¹²⁵ San-Diego-based actor Julia Giolzetti created the Sofa Shakespeare project as a direct response to the stay-at-home orders put in place as a protection against the spread of the virus.¹²⁶ The project featured a series of Shakespeare plays—thirteen in total—divided into one-minute segments, with each segment performed by a different actor or group of actors. The one-minute clips were recorded individually by each participant and then edited together by Giolzetti, resulting in a crowdsourced reading of the text featuring a wide range of actors, performance spaces, and stylistic choices. The final edited version of each play was then posted to YouTube, where (at the time of writing) the full catalogue of productions remains available for viewing. The project ran for nearly one year before going on indefinite hiatus on March 15th, 2021. Its format necessitated a high number of individual participants – the first production, *Romeo and Juliet*, featured over two hundred different actors¹²⁷ – and led to the creation of an expansive online community by connecting a broad network of contributors over a shared experience and shared creative process.

Unlike more standard virtual play-readings that feature a cast size more typical for a live Shakespearean production, with one actor per role (or multiple roles), Sofa Shakespeare's format allowed for (and in fact necessitated) a substantially larger selection of contributors. The project's marketing and press coverage emphasised the inclusivity of the work and its willingness to feature a wide variety of actors: in an interview with the *Times of San Diego*, Giolzetti says that the project "is meant for everyone in the world who feels isolated or scared".¹²⁸ The project did end up reaching an international pool of participants and audience members, with the majority of viewers coming from the United

¹²⁵ "WHO Timeline - COVID-19," World Health Organization, [who.int/news/item/27-04-2020-who-timeline---covid-19](https://www.who.int/news/item/27-04-2020-who-timeline---covid-19), last updated on 27 April 2020. According to this timeline, COVID-19 was initially declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020; however, it is worth noting that the implementation of lockdowns varied considerably by location and were not consistent worldwide.

¹²⁶ "What is Sofa Shakespeare?" *Sofa Shakespeare*, accessed 2 May 2023, sofashakespeare.com/about. This web page is no longer available at its original domain, but is still accessible via the Internet Archive.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Pat Launer, "Sheltering at Home for Bard Lovers: Julia Giolzetti's 'Sofa Shakespeare' Project," *The Times of San Diego*, 7 April 2020, timesofsandiego.com/arts/2020/04/07/sheltering-at-home-for-bard-lovers-julia-giolzettis-global-sofa-shakespeare-project/

States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and India.¹²⁹ (Sofa Shakespeare's website and all of its promotional material is written in English, so it is unsurprising that the project was most popular in countries with very high populations of English speakers. However, *Romeo and Juliet* did also feature sections of text translated into Spanish, Italian, and German, and the project's other productions featured a number of other foreign languages.) The project served to connect a network of actors and theatre-makers across geographical distance and international borders.

The format of Sofa Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* represents a unique interpretation of the role that distance plays in virtual theatre, in part due to the physical distance between participants. Because of the project's format, there was no consistent cast throughout the production, often meaning that one actor had to play multiple characters in their segment, or the same character could be played by multiple actors in the same scene. Because each one-minute segment was filmed by a different actor (or actors) in a different location, the setting indicated by each actor's surroundings is inconsistent and it is clear to the viewer that none of the clips were filmed under the exact same conditions; this was presented as a key feature of the project rather than an inevitability or problem to be worked around. Most of the segments appear to have been filmed in the actors' homes, with furniture (including a number of sofas, as the name of the project implies), household objects, and even other household members and pets visible in the background or even featured as participants. Other clips were filmed outdoors, or with a makeshift backdrop concealing the filming location. Some participants set up miniature "stages" on a table or floor, with characters portrayed by puppets or household objects in place of human actors. The frequent changes from one setting to the next—often more than once within the same scene in the play—emphasised the variety of different ideas and contributors, in a way that often superseded the play's storyline. Benjamin Broadribb describes this effect in his chapter in *Lockdown Shakespeare* as "presenting Shakespeare incongruously at times to the point of incoherence",¹³⁰ referring to the fact that the plot is, at times, difficult to follow due to the ever-changing cast and setting. This may not matter to many viewers, given the fact that *Romeo and Juliet* is one of Shakespeare's most well-known works, but may present a challenge to viewers who are not as familiar with the story (especially those from outside

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ Benjamin Broadribb, "Lockdown Shakespeare and the Metamodern Sensibility," in Gemma Kate Allred et al. (eds.), *Lockdown Shakespeare*, (Bloomsbury, 2022), 49.

the Western and English-speaking world who are less likely to have read the play in school). However, though the incongruity of the production served as a reminder that the participants were not physically together, I argue that the circumstances under which they were filmed served as a unifying factor. The glimpses into the lives of the more than two hundred participants acknowledged the physical distances between them but emphasised the fact that the isolation was shared by all: in other words, they were alone in their locations but still able to share this common experience with one another. The fact that separation, isolation, and uncertainty about the coming weeks or months were common experiences for all participants created a sense of unity, and the virtual format functioned not as a barrier to connection but as an instrument for facilitating it. On the whole, this incongruity is not a drawback; rather, it highlights the project's inclusive nature and its focus on creating ways for actors and theatre-makers to connect with one another and engage with the material, despite the fact that they were not able to directly collaborate with one another on the work itself.

As a text, *Romeo and Juliet* is a thematically appropriate choice for Sofa Shakespeare's first production: its story revolves around loved ones who have been separated from one another due to circumstances beyond their control. Although, as with all of Shakespeare's works, disease is not a central theme in the play, it does influence a major plot point: because of a plague outbreak, Romeo doesn't receive the letter informing him of the plan to feign Juliet's "death," and this miscommunication is what ultimately leads to the play's tragic ending. *Romeo and Juliet* first appeared in print in 1597 and was most likely written around 1595,¹³¹ not long after a plague outbreak in 1593,¹³² meaning that the plague was likely still fresh in the minds of the play's earliest audiences. Although these parallels with the play's historical context weren't necessarily intentional, viewing the Sofa Shakespeare project through a historical lens creates a new perspective with which to interpret the text. These themes in the text also highlight the fact that, although participants may be unfamiliar with widespread disease outbreaks, social distancing, and lockdowns as these concepts pertain to their personal lives, they are not issues that humanity has never dealt with before. Sofa Shakespeare presents a new setting for this scenario, and uses technology to create a project that stands out against the

¹³¹ Stanley Wells, introduction to "*Romeo and Juliet*," in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works, Second Edition*, ed. Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery, (Clarendon Press, 2005), 369.

¹³² Leeds Barroll, *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare's Theater: The Stuart Years*. (Cornell University Press, 1991), 97.

backdrop of existing applications of Shakespearean performance during outbreaks of disease.

In this chapter I will argue that, despite the fact that Sofa Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was created without contact or collaboration between most participants, its format served to highlight the commonalities between those who participated, as well as providing a snapshot of the overarching narrative of the early pandemic and how theatre-makers were beginning to adapt. Additionally, by positioning Sofa Shakespeare within the broader history of Shakespearean performance during outbreaks of disease, this chapter will demonstrate the ways in which the project recontextualises the themes of separation, disease, and death in *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as the parallels between the circumstances in which the play was written and the context in which this project was conceptualised and performed. The Sofa Shakespeare project emphasises the need for human connection amidst uncertainty, with regard to COVID-19 specifically and with regard to humanity's relationship with theatre and disease as a whole since Shakespeare's time.

II. Distance, Connection, and Community in Sofa Shakespeare

Sofa Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* premiered on March 24th, 2020, making it one of the earliest examples of large-scale Shakespearean works created during the COVID-19 lockdowns. (The Show Must Go Online was very slightly earlier, with their first production premiering five days previously on March 19th, two days after the West End closed their theatres, according to the project's website.¹³³) In Giolzetti's home state of California, a statewide lockdown order had been issued just five days prior.¹³⁴ As such, it serves as an example of the ways in which people were beginning to use technology as a means of creating theatre—and, by extension, virtual community—during this early period of lockdown. This is, of course, far from being the earliest known example of online Shakespearean performance in general, and Shakespearean works were already prevalent on YouTube prior to the pandemic: Stephen O'Neill's introduction to his book *Shakespeare and YouTube* states that a search on the platform for *Romeo and Juliet* alone returned over 86,000 results at the time of the book's publication.¹³⁵ Google and

¹³³ Rob Myles. "The Show Must Go Online," Rob Myles, accessed 1 July 2023, <https://robmyles.co.uk/theshowmustgoonline/>

¹³⁴ "Governor Gavin Newsom Issues Stay at Home Order," *Governor Gavin Newsom*, March 19th, 2020, <https://www.gov.ca.gov/2020/03/19/governor-gavin-newsom-issues-stay-at-home-order/>

¹³⁵ Stephen O'Neill, *Shakespeare and YouTube*, (Bloomsbury, 2014), 2.

YouTube have since removed the user's ability to see the number of search results for a keyword, but when I attempted this search in 2023 (when the feature was still available), it returned over two million results.¹³⁶ What sets Sofa Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* apart as a work of YouTube-based theatre are the circumstances under which it was created: viewers and participants were very likely to already be familiar with YouTube due to its ubiquity as a video-hosting platform, but not with the platform's function as a community-building space during a period of extended isolation. The novelty of the project comes from the fact that it was created with participants newly living in complete isolation from one another and from the rest of the world, and yet despite this it emphasised the commonality and shared circumstances between those involved. Tasnim Hossein, one of the actors from Sofa Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, is quoted in an article for the Australian publication *ABC Life* as saying, "It was a great way of feeling like there were all these people coming together to make some ridiculous little pieces of joy".¹³⁷ At the time of *Romeo and Juliet*'s filming and premiere, there was very little precedent for what theatre would look like during this extended period of isolation, and so its ability to have this effect on its participants speaks to the efficacy of this format as a virtual community space.

Most participants in Sofa Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* did not use elaborate costumes, sets, or visual effects in their recorded segments. This could have been in part because the turnaround time for the creation of Sofa Shakespeare's productions tended to be extremely short: according to the project's website, only nine days elapsed between Giolzetti's initial call for participants and the release of *Romeo and Juliet*¹³⁸—and since it was the first production in the series, there were no prior productions to refer back to for ideas and inspiration, or time to prepare for the potential of appearing in a future production. Though it is unclear exactly how much time actors had to prepare their clips for *Romeo and Juliet* specifically, the project's FAQ for Actors page also states that actors typically had between eighteen and forty-eight hours to record their video clips after being assigned their lines.¹³⁹ (Because *Romeo and Juliet* was the first attempt at the

¹³⁶ Due to recent changes to YouTube's search feature, the number of results for a given search is no longer visible to the user. This number was found by searching on Google for "Romeo and Juliet: youtube.com," and filtering the results to videos only.

¹³⁷ Edwina Storie, Matt Garrow, and Samantha Turnbull, "Coronavirus Isolation Inspires Creation, with the Help of Social Media," *ABC Life*, 7 April 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/everyday/coronavirus-isolation-inspired-creations-on-social-media/12126316>

¹³⁸ "What is Sofa Shakespeare?" See previous note regarding access.

¹³⁹ "Actor FAQs," *Sofa Shakespeare*, sofashakespeare.com/actor-faqs. See previous note regarding access.

format and process for the project, it is possible that the timeline may have been different than it was for subsequent productions. Based on timestamps from the project's Twitter page, the first clip for *Romeo and Juliet* appears to have been submitted the day after the project's initial creation.¹⁴⁰) Actors were also not only allowed but encouraged to take creative liberties with their work: the only firm instructions were to use the text they were assigned in its entirety with no paraphrasing or omissions, keep their clips under a minute, not use any copyrighted music, and use "landscape" orientation if they were filming on a mobile phone for the sake of keeping consistency with the other clips.¹⁴¹ There was no requirement that the participants have any professional acting experience, or, in fact, any acting experience at all: anyone could apply to participate via a Google Form set up by Giolzetti, and actors were selected on a first-come-first-served basis rather than an audition process. (This is similar to The Show Must Go Online's casting process, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapters.) Priority was given to those who hadn't yet appeared in a Sofa Shakespeare production (except, of course, in the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, since it was the first), but aside from that, anyone who was interested and able to work within the required timeframe was eligible to apply to participate.¹⁴² The project was designed to be as inclusive as possible, and to give as many people as possible the opportunity to perform Shakespeare from their homes.

This flexibility in terms of creative licence, combined with the limited preparation time, led to a wide variety of interpretations of the work, but as previously mentioned, a common thread throughout was the fact that most participants chose to—or perhaps in some cases had to—film from inside their homes or yards, with the backdrop providing a window into their domestic lives. As Broadribb describes it, "Nobody hides behind a facade of domestic perfection, but earnestly creates their minute of play in their homes—with real life creeping in however and whenever it chooses to do so".¹⁴³ One example of this "real life creeping in" happens almost immediately in the play's prologue, which is performed by Giolzetti: her young daughter can be heard making noise in the background, and Giolzetti breaks character to remind her to be quiet before inviting her to sit on her

¹⁴⁰ Sofa Shakespeare (@sofashakes), "Puppet Friar y'all! Our first submission is here!" Twitter, 16 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/sofashakes/status/1239702937523367946?s=20>

¹⁴¹ "Actor FAQs." See previous note regarding access.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ Broadribb, "Lockdown Shakespeare and the Metamodern Sensibility", 50.

lap during the prologue's final lines.¹⁴⁴ Instances such as this one serve as a reminder to the viewer of the circumstances in which the project was created: the participants generally did not have the access to a performance space free of distractions or background noise (the brief interruption from Giolzetti's daughter was especially indicative of the production's era, since many parents and caregivers were left without childcare due to the closure of schools and daycares). Douglas M. Lanier describes this phenomenon in an article for *Teaching Shakespeare* as "lay[ing] bare the conditions under which they were made":¹⁴⁵ there was no false pretence that the actors were physically together or working out of the same space, that they had access to costumes or sets aside from what they already had or could quickly and easily obtain within the restrictions of lockdown, or that they were working under what would typically be considered ideal conditions for theatre-making. This brings to mind Sullivan's idea of the "collective theatrical moment"¹⁴⁶ that can be created even with virtual and physically distant performance spaces: even though the actors in *Romeo and Juliet* were not interacting directly with one another (except within individual clips that featured multiple actors), the fact that all participants were working under the shared experience of lockdown gave the production a sense of solidarity, community, and togetherness across wide geographic distances. The numerous references to the pandemic, whether intentional or brought on as an inevitable product of the production's time period, are what allows Sofa Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to exist as a means of connection rather than a disjointed collection of scenes.

Aebischer's concept of the virtual *platea*,¹⁴⁷ or the online spaces in which actors and audience members can interact with one another, is apparent in Sofa Shakespeare's social media presence, which played a considerable role in establishing the virtual community that characterised the project. The project began on Facebook before it reached YouTube, when Giolzetti wrote a post asking if any of her friends were interested in the idea of collaborating on a lockdown theatre project.¹⁴⁸ The project soon had its own Facebook and Twitter pages, which served not only as promotional material but also as

¹⁴⁴ Sofa Shakespeare, *Sofa Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet - Act I scene i*. Sofa Shakespeare, Youtube, 24 March 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zD1U-0lBauo>

¹⁴⁵ Douglas M. Lanier, "Couching Shakespeare, Hidden Potential," *Teaching Shakespeare* 21, (2021), 21.

¹⁴⁶ Erin Sullivan, *Shakespeare and Digital Performance in Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 35.

¹⁴⁷ Pascale Aebischer, *Shakespeare, Spectatorship, and the Technologies of Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 20-27.

¹⁴⁸ "What is Sofa Shakespeare?" See previous note regarding access.

spaces for participants and viewers to interact with the work and with one another. These served as spaces to update participants on new developments with the project, as well as community spaces for participants and fans of the project to interact with one another. (The Facebook group has since been set to private and is therefore no longer visible to non-members at the time of writing.¹⁴⁹) Audience members were invited via social media to interact with the work in ways other than simply watching it, including presenting their own interpretations of the text in various playful ways. For example, the project's Twitter page regularly ran a contest called "To Meme or Not to Meme," in which viewers were challenged to create their own internet memes based on scenes from various plays, with the winners posted on Twitter several days later.¹⁵⁰ The account frequently shared tweets by actors from the production, giving audiences an opportunity to interact with them directly. The use of interactive social media pages alongside the project's video content solidified the project's positioning as a community-building endeavour, and demonstrated the use of virtual, internet-based theatre as a means of facilitating connection. Despite taking place on a different platform than the videos themselves, this virtual *platea* allowed for increased interaction between actors and audience members and helped to build the virtual community surrounding Sofa Shakespeare. Sullivan builds on this idea by describing social media as a "third space", separate from the performance space, in which audience members can interact with the production and with one another,¹⁵¹ as is the case here. In a sense, this virtual "third space" assumes the role that a lobby or bar would fulfil in a typical theatre, where audience members can socialise and discuss the production with one another. Through the use of virtual mediums, contributors and viewers were able to connect in an online space and participate in shared experiences related to the project, despite the overall isolation that characterised the time period.

This idea of the virtual *platea* and "third space"¹⁵² pertains specifically to *Romeo and Juliet* because the project itself was created via social media: as previously mentioned, Giolzetti originally put out the call for participants on Facebook.¹⁵³ The first

¹⁴⁹ Information accurate as of March 25, 2025.

¹⁵⁰ Sofa Shakespeare (@sofashakes), "ANNOUNCING THE NEXT SOFA SHAKESPEARE MEME COMPETITION..." Twitter, 30 September 2020, <https://twitter.com/sofashakes/status/1311093272832479232?s=20>

¹⁵¹ Sullivan, *Shakespeare and Digital Performance in Practice*, 36.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵³ "What is Sofa Shakespeare?"

tweet on the project's Twitter page is dated 16 March 2020,¹⁵⁴ just a day after the initial call for participants and eight days prior to *Romeo and Juliet*'s release. The project's social media presence existed prior to the release of any of its productions, and so at the time of *Romeo and Juliet*'s premiere, social media was the only platform on which participants could interact with the work and with one another. Of course, it is not unusual for contemporary theatrical works to be advertised on social media prior to their premiere, and most theatre companies in the twenty-first century have some sort of online presence. What makes Sofa Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* unique in this sense is that the project and its surrounding community were, due to circumstances rather than by choice, limited to social media in terms of interaction, with the project's conception, creative process, and final product all taking place in the online space. Social media could not be used as a supplement to in-person engagement with the work and with one another, but rather as the primary tool for creating and maintaining these connections. Furthermore, since *Romeo and Juliet* was the first work released by the project, audience members had no previous productions to look to as a frame of reference for the project's scope. As the previous chapter illustrates, while the practice of creating theatre during theatre closures caused by outbreaks of disease is not a new concept, COVID-19 was the first disease outbreak of its scale in which the technology to produce a project like Sofa Shakespeare was possible, and, therefore, there was no existing body of work from which to draw inspiration that can be directly compared to Sofa Shakespeare. Thus, collaborative social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were essential for ensuring that participants had a space to engage with this new community in a tangible way. The project's social media presence served as early audiences' introduction to the work, and acted as a base for the creation of the community that ensued.

Social media is crucial to the co-present nature of the production because, as previously mentioned and unlike the other works discussed in this thesis, Sofa Shakespeare is not a livestreamed work of theatre: participants pre-recorded their individual clips, which Giolzetti then edited together. However, in part because of the project's social media presence, the premiere of each Sofa Shakespeare production was presented in a way that facilitated real-time participation in a comparable manner to a live show. Each production was initially posted to YouTube one scene at a time in

¹⁵⁴ Sofa Shakespeare (@sofashakes), "Puppet Friar y'all! Our first submission is here!" Twitter, 16 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/sofashakes/status/1239702937523367946?s=20>

chronological order, with an accompanying link for each scene posted to the project's Twitter page as it was uploaded, thus allowing viewers to watch each scene as it was posted in real time simultaneously with one another. These scene uploads included an "intermission" (i.e. a brief pause where no new content was uploaded) midway through, giving audiences a chance to take a short break or catch up on any scenes they had missed.¹⁵⁵ Each production was then uploaded to YouTube again as a full-length play (rather than scene-by-scene as before), and was streamed using YouTube's "Premiere" feature. This feature allows viewers to watch in synchronicity with one another: much like a live television broadcast, they could rewind to previous scenes but not fast-forward to any point in the show that hadn't "aired" yet. Crucial to the sense of liveness associated with the Premiere feature is the live chat, a chat box to the right of the screen that allows viewers to leave comments timestamped to a precise moment in the video. Though the live chat for *Romeo and Juliet* is no longer available for viewing, the chat for the following production, *Twelfth Night*, has not been taken down at the time of writing. In this chat, audience members were able to interact with each other as well as actors from the play and the Sofa Shakespeare YouTube account,¹⁵⁶ lending a sense of live audience participation in a virtual *platea*. Once again, technology allows liveness to exist in a remediated form, bringing physically distant audience members closer as they collectively experience the performance.

The aforementioned ways in which Sofa Shakespeare was disseminated to the public is reminiscent of Sullivan's notions of "aliveness" and "collective engagement".¹⁵⁷ Although it may be argued that Sofa Shakespeare is pre-recorded and therefore not a work that can facilitate shared presence by actors and/or audience members, Sullivan addresses this by recontextualising liveness within the new technologies that allow for shared experiences to exist across different spaces and different times. Liveness (or aliveness) depends on the act of the shared experience itself, rather than the time or place in which it happens. I argue that Sofa Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* meets this criteria, given the interaction between audience members that occurred via social media and in the YouTube live chats during the premiere stream. The participants were further connected

¹⁵⁵ Sofa Shakespeare (@sofashakes), "INTERMISSION! Meme courtesy of Mindy Keenan. *400 year old spoiler alert," Twitter, 16 March 2021, <https://twitter.com/sofashakes/status/1371628303010861056?s=20>

¹⁵⁶ *Sofa Shakespeare: Twelfth Night or What You Will ENTIRE PLAY*. Sofa Shakespeare, YouTube, 2 April 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkh5RS_7eaI

¹⁵⁷ Sullivan, *Shakespeare and Digital Performance in Practice*, 37.

through the shared experience of viewing the production during the specific time period in which it took place: the early weeks of the pandemic, when viewers were just beginning to adjust to the period of isolation brought on by the lockdowns, an experience that many have described as collective trauma. Sullivan argues that “The feeling of being there [i.e., collectively witnessing and experiencing a theatrical performance], together, remains crucial, but the way that feeling comes about is not wholly dependent on occupying one specific time and place”,¹⁵⁸ and this idea is taken further when discussing a work that was created during a time when occupying the same place was no longer possible in most cases. The virtual *platea* afforded by social media and the synchronised broadcasts of the production’s premieres added to this sense of collective experience and allowed audience members to participate and interact directly with the production, providing the audience with a way to view the work collectively regardless of physical proximity or temporal “liveness”. Despite the fact that *Romeo and Juliet* was not streamed in real time, viewers were able to engage with the work in a way that nonetheless allowed for interpersonal connection.

III. Plague and Isolation in *Romeo and Juliet* and COVID-19

Although Sofa Shakespeare’s online presence does not indicate why *Romeo and Juliet* was selected as the first play for the project, it is a fitting choice for both creative and practical reasons. The play’s ubiquity made it a familiar choice, especially given the frequency with which it is taught in schools (a survey of high school English teachers conducted by Whittier College in 2013 revealed that the play is taught in roughly ninety-three percent of ninth-grade English classes in the United States),¹⁵⁹ and the accessibility of the text was useful for participants as well. (At the time of writing, a Google search for “Romeo and Juliet full text” returns more than twenty-one million results. A search for the Second Folio text, which is the version used in Sofa Shakespeare, returns about three-and-half million results.) Sullivan describes Shakespeare’s ready accessibility as fundamental to creating “ready-made audience for digitally accessible, economically affordable performances of his plays,” referring to the high number of people in English-speaking countries who have studied Shakespeare in school, and the resulting popularity

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵⁹ Jonathan Burton, “Shakespeare in Liberal Arts Education,” *Whittier College*, whittier.edu/news/mon-11042013-1043-am/shakespeare-liberal-arts-education, 2013.

of easily-accessible versions of his productions.¹⁶⁰ Regardless of the initial reason for choosing this text, however, I argue that many of the play's central themes take on a new relevance when performed by actors in isolation. As previously mentioned, the crowdsourced and eclectic format that characterises Sofa Shakespeare often comes at the expense of the plot's continuity; however, the isolation of the individual performers serves to intensify the play's themes of separation. Although some of the play's one-minute segments include multiple actors who were able to film together, the majority feature one actor working alone, sometimes having to play multiple characters in the same scene. In a play about characters forced to live in separation from one another, these images of actors in isolation illustrate the parallels between the era of COVID-19 lockdowns and the play's text. The subject matter of the play speaks to the enduring themes of isolation and interpersonal connection, and the presence-at-a-distance afforded by the virtual *platea* gives the production a sense of hopefulness and community amidst these themes. The production's use of technology serves as both a reminder of the separation inherent to the era and to the source text, but also as a means of moving past this isolation and forming new connections and communities.

Romeo and Juliet first appeared in print in 1597, and was most likely written in 1594 or 1595,¹⁶¹ closely following the first severe plague outbreak of Shakespeare's writing career in 1592-1593, as well as a proclamation in 1594 that prohibited theatres in London from operating during plague outbreaks.¹⁶² (The play's first performances also closely followed the death of Shakespeare's son Hamnet in 1596, although it is unknown whether he died of the plague or some other cause.) Much like Sofa Shakespeare's audiences in the twenty-first century, *Romeo and Juliet*'s earliest audiences would have been familiar with the prospect of theatre closures for the purpose of disease prevention. By the next major plague outbreak in 1603 (in which theatres in London remained closed until April 1604¹⁶³), *Romeo and Juliet* was available in print for those who had access to printed books. Although the first known *recorded* performance of an amateur production of Shakespeare's works did not happen until around twenty years later,¹⁶⁴ it is possible

¹⁶⁰ Sullivan, *Shakespeare and Digital Performance in Practice*, 30.

¹⁶¹ Wells, introduction to *Romeo and Juliet*, 396.

¹⁶² Barroll, *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare's Theatre*, 97.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁶⁴ Emma Poltrack, "Edward Dering and the earliest record of an amateur private performance of a Shakespeare play," *Shakespeare & Beyond*, Folger Shakespeare Library, 14 April 2020, <https://www.folger.edu/blogs/shakespeare-and-beyond/edward-dering-amateur-private-performance-shakespeare-play/>

(although not confirmed) that wealthier members of society read plays aloud in their homes during this extended period of theatre closures. (An article written by Austin Tichenor for the Folger Shakespeare Library theorises that the earlier plague outbreaks—and resulting theatre closures—in 1592-1593 may in fact have increased the demand for printed copies of Shakespeare’s plays later on, so that they would still be able to read the plays at home in the event of another outbreak that would lose them access to theatres.¹⁶⁵) Though of course COVID-19 is the first large-scale pandemic in which the technology necessary to execute a project such as *Sofa Shakespeare* existed, the idea of reading plays within the home during outbreaks of disease is nothing new. *Sofa Shakespeare*’s *Romeo and Juliet* was a continuation of this tradition, both in reference to *Romeo and Juliet* specifically and the catalogue of Shakespearean works as a whole. *Sofa Shakespeare* used this new technology to create a new way to implement this existing idea, and allow household readings to not only allow for entertainment and artistic license within the home, but to allow participants to interact with one another as well.

These themes of separation and isolation in *Romeo and Juliet* are indicative of the circumstances under which it was written and are apparent throughout the text, and *Sofa Shakespeare* presents them in a new context that both anchors the play in its historical significance and pushes it forward into the twenty-first century. Act III, scene iii, in which Romeo is informed of his banishment to Mantua following Tybalt’s death at his hands, is an example of this. He responds to this news by saying, “Be merciful, say ‘death,’/For exile hath more terror in his look/Much more than death.”¹⁶⁶ Although this exile occurs under markedly different circumstances than those under which *Sofa Shakespeare* was filmed, this expression of sorrow over separation from a loved one mirrors the difficulty and uncertainty of the early lockdowns—especially since in March of 2020, there was no clarity regarding how long these separations would last. Juliet expresses a similar sentiment in Act III scene ii when she hears of this news, saying that “that one word ‘banishèd’/Hath slain ten thousand Tybalts”.¹⁶⁷ While viewers may not have shared either character’s view that separation from loved ones was a fate worse than death (especially given the fact that the isolation measures were put in place for the very

¹⁶⁵ Austin Tichenor, “Sonnets & Chill: What did Shakespeare’s audiences do when the theaters were closed?” *Shakespeare & Beyond*, Folger Shakespeare Library, 1 May 2020, <https://www.folger.edu/blogs/shakespeare-and-beyond/theaters-closed-shakespeare-audiences-plague/>.

¹⁶⁶ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (*Arden Third Series*), ed. René Weis (Bloomsbury, 2012), III.iii.13-15.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, III.ii.124-125.

purpose of preventing illness and untimely death), the fear and anguish caused by this kind of separation would have been poignantly familiar to many viewers. The comparisons between separation and death continue in Act III scene iv, during Romeo and Juliet's last meeting before Romeo's departure for Mantua: Juliet tells him that "thou art so low,/As one dead in the bottom of a tomb",¹⁶⁸ and Romeo agrees that "Dry sorrow drinks our blood".¹⁶⁹ Again, these sentiments take on new meanings and resonances when performed during an extended period of isolation, in a production in which the performers themselves are in lockdown and likely separated from friends and loved ones. *Sofa Shakespeare's* format, however, emphasises and facilitates connection rather than isolation, and features a cast of actors who are united by common circumstances despite their lack of physical proximity. By performing a play that deals with themes of separation in a format that fosters community, *Sofa Shakespeare* is able to recontextualise this narrative into something hopeful rather than a death sentence.

The references to the plague in *Romeo and Juliet* are also recontextualised in *Sofa Shakespeare*, and in the context of the cultural narrative during the pandemic as a whole. Throughout the lockdowns, Shakespearean imagery has frequently been associated with messaging related to the disease and how to prevent its spread: for example, a popular meme shared in the early months of the COVID-19 lockdowns shows the text of Lady Macbeth's famous "Out, damned spot!" monologue alongside a step-by-step illustration demonstrating a thorough hand-washing technique.¹⁷⁰ The plague references in *Romeo and Juliet* are perhaps less prevalent in pop culture, but are nonetheless important when discussing *Sofa Shakespeare's* relevance to the time period in which it was produced. Mercutio curses the rivalry that ultimately caused his death with the phrase, "A plague o' both your houses":¹⁷¹ a particularly shocking sentiment for an audience already intimately familiar with the realities of widespread disease: the play's earliest audiences would have seen (if not personally experienced) the trauma of having the plague invade one's home. This line, when spoken in the context of COVID-19, similarly represents a very tangible experience rather than a hypothetical or distant threat. The plague also ends up being the catalyst that ultimately (albeit indirectly) leads to the deaths of the title characters: Friar

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, III.iv.55-56.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, III.iv.59.

¹⁷⁰ Emma Smith, "'Out Damned Spot': the Lady Macbeth hand-washing scene that became a coronavirus meme," *Penguin Features*, 12 March 2020, <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2020/03/the-history-behind-the-lady-macbeth-coronavirus-meme>

¹⁷¹ *Romeo and Juliet*, III.i.87.

John, who was meant to deliver a letter to Romeo explaining the plan for the lovers' escape, is unable to complete this task because he is put in quarantine following an outbreak of the plague.¹⁷² This period of quarantine—and the resulting inability to communicate with Romeo in time—is what sets the tragic events of the play's final act in motion. This scene in Sofa Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, in which Friar Lawrence and Friar John are portrayed by homemade-looking hand puppets, references the parallel between this plague and COVID-19 using one of the production's only extratextual lines: after Friar John mentions the “infectious pestilence”¹⁷³ that put him in quarantine, both puppets turn to face the camera and exclaim, “Corona!”¹⁷⁴ These connections between the circumstances outlined in the text and the ongoing situation in the outside world at the time of filming not only recontextualised *Romeo and Juliet* within the framework of COVID-19, but also brought new meaning to the play's four-hundred-year-old text by bringing to mind the current situation shared by participants and viewers.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, V.ii.5-16.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, V.ii.10.

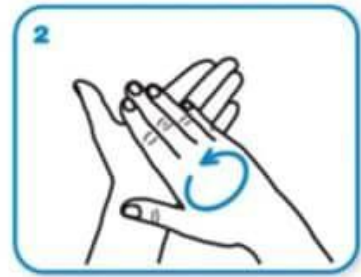
¹⁷⁴ Sofa Shakespeare, *Sofa Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet - Act V scene ii*, Youtube, 24 March 2020. <https://youtu.be/ZtuAPo6GZlo>



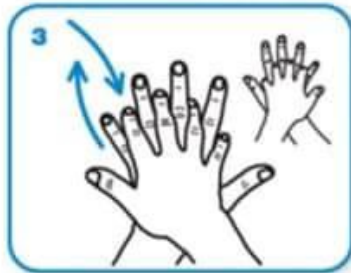
out, damned spot!



Out, I say!



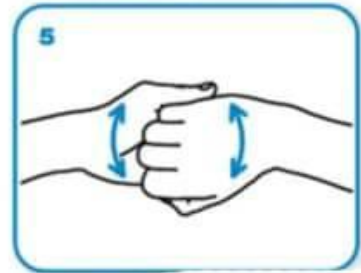
One, two. Why, then,



'tis time to do 't.



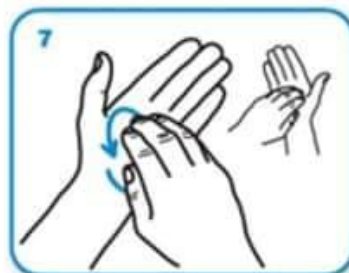
Hell is murky!—



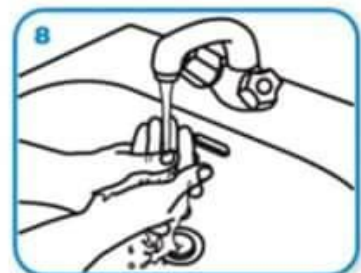
Fie, my lord, fie!



A soldier, and afeard?



**What need we fear
who knows it,**



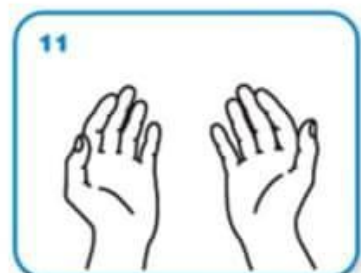
**when none can call
our power to account?**



**Yet who would have
thought**



the old man



**to have had so
much blood in him.**

Image description: A diagram demonstrating a proper hand-washing technique, with sections of Lady Macbeth's "Out, damned spot!" monologue as the caption for each step. (Source: Smith, "Out Damned Spot".)

Romeo and Juliet also features a number of less direct references to the plague, which, again, would have still been fresh in the minds of the play's earliest audiences. The play's primary source material, which predates the 1592-1593 plague outbreak. Arthur Brooke's long-form poem "The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet", published in 1562, is set in the winter, and Nichole DeWall argues in an article for *ANQ* that Shakespeare likely decided to set the play in the summer because the plague is more prevalent in warmer weather. DeWall suggests that "For Shakespeare's playgoers [...], the summer's association with the pestilence must have felt immediate, particularly since *Romeo and Juliet* was performed before the horrifying outbreak of 1592-93 had receded from their collective memory",¹⁷⁵ and that "Perhaps Shakespeare knew that a plague outbreak during Christmastime would resonate less directly with the lived experiences of *Romeo and Juliet*'s spectators".¹⁷⁶ The summer setting of the play would likely have invoked visceral memories of the plague for the play's earliest audiences, much in the way that the visual language of much of Sofa Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* elicits memories of a different disease, both for the production's early viewers and to viewers watching now, a few years post-lockdown but still with relatively recent memories of the time. Many of these visual reminders in Sofa Shakespeare's version of the play would not, however, be immediately recognisable as "plague hallmarks" to someone who did not live through the COVID-19 lockdowns: for example, rolls of toilet paper or laptops displaying Zoom calls wouldn't necessarily be of note to someone who had not directly experienced lockdown, but would immediately bring to mind toilet paper shortages or spontaneous office closures for someone who had lived through this time. Similarly, a modern-day audience member most likely wouldn't necessarily associate the summer with disease outbreaks (especially since many modern diseases are now more prevalent in the winter months), but to a person who had lived through the London plague outbreaks in Shakespeare's era, the mention of summer and warm weather would likely bring to mind the recent mass deaths that had occurred in the summer just a few years prior. Magdy Gomaa Sayed also argues in an article for *Journal for the Faculty of Arts, Beni Suef University* that collective trauma likely had an impact on Shakespeare's writing of the play, stating that the character's overpowering love for one another and their families'

¹⁷⁵ Nichole DeWall, "The Plague in *Romeo and Juliet*: 'The Day is Hot'", *ANQ* 36, no. 3 (2023): 334, <https://www-tandfonline-com.elib.tcd.ie/doi/full/10.1080/0895769X.2021.1983717>

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 335.

rivalry are forms of “infection” that ultimately leads to their downfall.¹⁷⁷ The feud between the two families, according to Sayed, also acts as a sort of infectious disease, which “spread not just to the close members of the two families [...], but also their innocent relatives and friends”.¹⁷⁸ Literal illness is only part of the collective trauma of large-scale disease outbreaks, which is an idea that is similarly reflected when looking back upon the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021: COVID-19 itself was of course a massive trauma for those who contracted the disease and their families and loved ones, but another component to this trauma was the extended period of isolation and uncertainty necessitated by the disease. As is illustrated in *Romeo and Juliet*, the effects of contagion can come in many forms, which gives the play a new resonance when performed in the context of a modern-day pandemic.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the play’s themes, *Romeo and Juliet* is a popular choice for plays performed in distant or isolating settings. An article for a 2021 issue of *Lingue e Linguaggi* by Mariacristina Cavecchi details two such instances: a 2015 adaptation called *Romeo and Juliet Separated by War*, directed by Nawar Bulbul and featuring a cast of teenage Syrian refugees living in Jordan, and a 2018 adaptation called *Romeo Montecchi: innocente o colpevole?* [“Romeo Montecchi: innocent or guilty?”], directed by Guiseppe Scutellà in an Italian juvenile correctional facility. Both casts faced extended periods of isolation from their families and loved ones, as well as immense uncertainty about what their futures would hold. It is no coincidence that *Romeo and Juliet* served as the primary inspiration for both works: as Cavecchi puts it, the play (and specifically the balcony scene in this case) is “particularly useful in figuring situations of liminality, *in-between-ness*. It is a threshold between the individual and society, between love and conflict/war, and perhaps even between genres”.¹⁷⁹ COVID-19, and especially the very early days of lockdown when Sofa Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* was conceptualised and recorded, had a similar sense of liminality: day-to-day life for most people was put on hold, for an as-yet-uncertain period of time, with little information about what would happen next or how things would continue. With prolonged separation

¹⁷⁷ Magdy Goma Sayed, “Drama in Quarantine: Exploring the Traumatic Impact of Plague on William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*,” *Journal of the Faculty of Arts, Beni Suef University* 8, no. 71 (2024): 55, https://jfabsu.journals.ekb.eg/article_372301_938fa9ad0302fa6aeacced01e0a32643.pdf

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁷⁹ Mariacristina Cavecchi, “Shakespeare and Digital Pathways: Shortening Distances with *Romeo and Juliet*,” *Lingui e Linguaggi* 45 (2021): 170-171, <http://siba-esce.unisalento.it/index.php/linguelinguaggi/article/view/24511>

comes great uncertainty, and both the play and the real-world circumstances surrounding these productions clearly demonstrate this.

The first piece discussed in Cavecchi's article, *Romeo and Juliet Separated by War*, utilised online video streaming in a manner similar to that of the works discussed in this thesis. Some cast members appeared via the online video calling platform Skype, not as an aesthetic choice but because of real-world physical separation due to the ongoing conflict in Syria. In this version of the play, the "star-crossed lovers" are physically distant but able to use Skype to connect with one another, in real life and within the context of the play. Cavecchi describes Skype and other video-calling platforms as "push[ing] the boundaries of live Shakespeare interactivity" –an advantage that would become even more apparent in 2020 as the use of these platforms increased widely. Much like *Sofa Shakespeare*, the digital platform is not just an accommodation made out of necessity, but a key hallmark of the work: both works highlight the power of technology to bring people together during times of distance and hardship. (Poignantly, *Romeo and Juliet Separated by War*'s narrative diverges from the tragic ending of the original source material: the title characters survive, and yell to the cameras, "Enough killing! Enough blood! Why are you killing us?"¹⁸⁰ With the aid of technology and the interpersonal connections that it affords, the characters are able to reclaim their own narratives and regain control of their own futures.)

The references to disease in *Sofa Shakespeare*'s *Romeo and Juliet* were not limited to scenes that directly discuss the plague. In the full-length version of the play posted on YouTube, the video's description reads: "Two households, both alike in dignity/In fair CORONA where we lay our scene",¹⁸¹ a play on words based on the phrase "fair Verona"¹⁸² in the play's prologue. A segment of Act I scene i has one of the actors appear in a video chat on a laptop screen,¹⁸³ bringing to mind the video-conferencing platforms such as Zoom that were a prevalent communication method during the lockdowns. (It is unclear whether this actor chose to appear in a video chat rather than film in-person with their scene partner as a deliberate reference to the time period in which it was filmed, or if the two actors were unable to film in the same space due to

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁸¹ *Sofa Shakespeare*, *Sofa Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet ENTIRE PLAY*, Youtube, 24 March 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNLurIIYAsw>

¹⁸² Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 0.0.2.

¹⁸³ *Sofa Shakespeare* *Sofa Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet - Act I scene i*, YouTube, 24 March 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zD1U-0lBaUo>

lockdown restrictions. Regardless, the appearance of the actor on a laptop screen serves as a reminder of the virtual modes of communication that were necessary during that time.) Later, in Act IV scene iii, the potion Juliet drinks to feign her death is represented by a bottle of hand sanitiser.¹⁸⁴ This brings to mind the hand sanitiser shortages in the earliest days of the pandemic, but also serves as a juxtaposition between a purifying substance meant to prevent the spread of disease, and a poison meant to imitate death. These reminders throughout the play serve as visual representations of the era in which the play was performed, and once again remind the audience of the circumstances shared by all participants. These reminders can help to facilitate Sullivan's idea of "collective engagement"¹⁸⁵ that is crucial for virtual performance: by seeing so many visual reminders in rapid succession of the circumstances in which the play was filmed, the viewer is reminded of the common circumstances shared by participants and the unifying factors that the production emphasises. The sheer number of participants in *Sofa Shakespeare* speaks not only to the scope of the pandemic and the diversity in circumstances of those affected, but also the commonalities between those who took part. The fact that so many participants decided independently of one another to include these references is a testament to the unifying nature of the project: by allowing participants to make their own creative choices, themes were able to emerge organically and create a crowdsourced overview of a collective experience. As such, *Sofa Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* is an example of how shared common experiences can create solidarity and connection, even when occupying the same physical or even temporal space is not possible.

¹⁸⁴ *Sofa Shakespeare, Sofa Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet - Act IV scene iii*, Youtube, 24 March 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0QBbGFI52N4> 2020, <https://youtu.be/LhJYKCSL33>

¹⁸⁵ Sullivan, *Shakespeare and Digital Performance in Practice*, 37.



Image description: A screenshot from Act IV, scene iii of *Sofa Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*, in which Juliet is represented by a Lego figurine and her bottle of poison is represented by a bottle of hand sanitiser. (Source: Sofa Shakespeare, *Sofa Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet - Act IV scene iii*, Youtube, 24 March 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0QBbGFI52N4>, 3:21.)

IV. Conclusion

Sofa Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*'s positioning as an early example of Shakespearean theatre during the COVID-19 lockdowns allows it to serve as a demonstration of how virtual theatre was beginning to become re-contextualised under these new and unfamiliar circumstances. The experimental nature of this project's first production allows it to stand out as an example of how theatrical formats were evolving during the early lockdowns, and how the utility of digitally mediated works and its relationship to theories of liveness were beginning to be applied to this restrictive performing environment. Additionally, it demonstrates a shift in the existing practices of performance during disease-related theatre closures, and how contemporary technology was beginning to adapt these practices to make them accessible to larger groups of people at one time. *Romeo and Juliet* is of course far from the only example of these phenomena

in the context of COVID-19, but it is one of the first examples, and therefore demonstrates in real time the changes that were taking place and the movement towards a fully virtual theatrical playing space. The project can serve as a point of reference when discussing the changes in virtual theatre over the course of the lockdowns, which will be discussed in future chapters.

By including a large cast of participants, utilising social media and the virtual *platea*, and selecting a source-text that deals with themes of isolation and disease, Sofa Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* exists as a work that is not only indicative of its era (and its positioning within the broader context of Shakespearean performance during disease outbreaks) but also valuable in creating a virtual community in which collaboration can exist over broad physical distances. The project's eclectic and crowdsourced nature allows for a wide variety of interpretations of the text and a vast array of individual participants, but it also emphasises the commonalities between participants. By showcasing so many glimpses into participants' homes, lives, and creative processes, the project was able to use its virtual platform to highlight the shared experiences of those who took part and the commonalities between human beings in a period of isolation and uncertainty.

Chapter 3: Sounds and the Supernatural in *The Show Must Go Online's Macbeth*

I. Introduction

When working in a virtually-mediated performance space, it is important to consider how the use of virtual platforms such as Zoom and YouTube can offer unique opportunities to enhance the performer's ability to reach the audience on a multisensory level. As a case study to discuss this issue, I have chosen *The Show Must Go Online's Macbeth* (dir. Rob Myles), which premiered on October 7th, 2020. Written in the second half of Shakespeare's writing career, it premiered towards the end of the project's run, about six weeks before the final production (*The Tempest*) on November 18th—which meant that unlike the early-lockdown work discussed in the previous chapter, this production represents a point in the project's lifetime at which the project's procedures had been refined and formalised, rather than an experiment or proof of concept.

Although Zoom as a platform does not allow for the audience member to be physically present in the performance venue and experience the multisensory elements that that entails, I argue that *The Show Must Go Online's Macbeth* successfully uses the platform to create a multisensory experience for the audience, and in fact uses it as a creative advantage. One aspect of *The Show Must Go Online's Macbeth* that exemplifies this idea and sets it apart from other plays featured in the project is its use of sound design. Although it is not the only production in *The Show Must Go Online* to feature a dedicated sound designer—Adam Gibson, who was the sound designer for the duration of the project's run—sound design is featured more heavily in *Macbeth* than in most of the project's other shows, and is even described by Myles as one of the most complex weeks the project has seen in terms of sound design.¹⁸⁶ These sound design elements feature most heavily in the witches' scenes, using audio distortion effects to manipulate the witches' voices and give them an otherworldly quality. This, combined with the use of striking makeup and dramatic camera angles, highlights the witches' supernatural existence via their visual and auditory presence—the two sensory elements most easily conveyed via online platforms like Zoom or YouTube.

Of course, *The Show Must Go Online's Macbeth* belongs to a long and established tradition of using virtual performance spaces or sound design in ways that

¹⁸⁶ Rob Myles, *The Show Must Go Online: Macbeth*, YouTube, 7 October 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAAI_c65nZY&t=1435s, 2:48:22.

highlight the play's supernatural elements or the characters' psychological turmoil. This chapter will highlight three other versions and adaptations of the play that utilise these techniques: *Shakespeare in the Dark: Macbeth* (2018) by Past is Prologue Productions and the Filigree Theatre, *Sleep No More* (2011-2024) by Punchdrunk Theatre, and the Donmar Warehouse's *Macbeth* (2023-2024). *Shakespeare in the Dark: Macbeth* is (as the name suggests) performed entirely in the dark, with the audience experiencing the play through the voices of live actors alongside pre-recorded sound effects. *Sleep No More* is an immersive show adapted from the play, set in a five-story building and featuring almost no spoken dialogue, relying instead on dance and movement, written texts that the audience can read, and music and other auditory effects that set the mood for different areas of the play's sprawling setting. The Donmar Warehouse's *Macbeth* requires the audience to wear earpieces that are connected to the actor's microphones, allowing for the audience to hear whispered lines and subtle sound effects that would otherwise be inaudible, thus manufacturing a sense of intimacy between actor and audience member. This chapter will position The Show Must Go Online's *Macbeth* within the broader history of the play's various interpretations and adaptations, and highlight how the virtual performance spaces popularised during lockdown are uniquely equipped for these kinds of artistic choices.

II. "Fair is Foul and Foul is Fair": Plague Imagery in the Text

As a text, *Macbeth* lends itself particularly well to performance within the context of a pandemic. Although the plague is not referenced directly in the play (with the exception of the brief mention of a disease afflicting "a crew of wretched souls"¹⁸⁷ in England), issues such as social unrest, political corruption, or guilt are frequently compared to physical illnesses. Shortly before killing Duncan, for example, Macbeth tells himself that "Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return to plague th' inventor",¹⁸⁸ comparing the potential psychological and social consequences of murder to plague from which he would never be able to escape. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, compares Macbeth's reluctance to commit murder to an illness, telling him that he is "So brain-

¹⁸⁷ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (*Arden Shakespeare Second Series*), ed. Kenneth Muir (Bloomsbury, 1997), IV.iii.141.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, I.vii.9-10.

sickly of things”¹⁸⁹ when he expresses guilt and remorse over killing Duncan’s chamberlains. To Macbeth, this association between guilt and illness is an indication that he should reconsider his actions, but to Lady Macbeth, this comparison suggests that the guilt itself is a sign of weakness. Later in the play, Ross compares the disorder in Scotland following Duncan’s murder to that of a city struck with a deadly plague, saying that “It cannot / be call’d our mother, but our grave”¹⁹⁰ and that “The dead man’s knell / Is there scarce ask’d for who, and good men’s lives / Expire before the flowers in their caps, / Dying or ere they sicken”.¹⁹¹ Although this catastrophe is caused by political turmoil and grief over a country in disorder, the imagery of frequent death knells and widespread illness is reminiscent of the bubonic plague’s effect on London. Although this imagery was not as prevalent during the COVID-19 lockdowns (as discussed in the previous chapter, most people alive during this era did not directly witness other people’s serious illness or death from the disease), the fear of serious infection or death was very widespread during this time. The sociopolitical turmoil in *Macbeth*’s Scotland is also comparable to the political climate in many parts of the world in 2020, not just in terms of the pandemic and the resulting controversy over the extent of the lockdown measures, but also periods of social unrest following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police and the ensuing Black Lives Matter protests that summer, or the impending presidential election in the United States (which took place less than a month after *The Show Must Go Online*’s *Macbeth* premiered). The play continues to parallel modern-day events, as with the Donmar Warehouse’s version that played in London during Trump’s return to office in January 2021 (and will be discussed more extensively later in this chapter). *Macbeth* and the state of the world in 2020 and beyond demonstrate how widespread disease and widespread social unrest often go hand-in-hand.

Witchcraft and the supernatural are often associated with disease in early modern writing, likely stemming from the belief that witches are inherently unclean and liable to spread contagious illnesses. The French demonologist Jean Bodin wrote in 1580 that witches “attract poison from the earth, and infection from the air”¹⁹² and then spread those poisons and infections to those around them, an idea reflected in the witches’

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, II.ii.44.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, IV.iii.165-166.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, IV.iii.170-173.

¹⁹² Jean Bodin 1580, quoted in Bronwyn Johnston, “Go Touch His Life: Contagious Malice and the Power of Touch in *The Witch of Edmonton*,” in *Contagion and the Shakespearean Stage*, ed. Darryl Chalk and Mary Floyd-Wilson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 66.

reference to “filthy air” in the play’s opening scene.¹⁹³ Bronwyn Johnston writes in her chapter ““Go Touch His Life’: Contagious Malice and the Power of Touch in *The Witch of Edmonton*” that, according to early modern beliefs, “The witch is the embodiment of the town’s refuse pile, a noxious source of infection primed to contaminate all with whom she comes into contact”.¹⁹⁴ Witches were seen as a threat to the public in part because of their ability to harm anyone who came near them, much like a carrier for a contagious illness such as the plague. In *Macbeth*, the First Witch alludes to casting a spell on an unnamed man that so that “Shall sleep neither night nor day/ Hang upon his penthouse lid”¹⁹⁵ and that he will “dwindle, peak, and pine”¹⁹⁶ from exhaustion, suggesting that the witches are capable of using magic to inflict physical harm on people. Although in this case the witches do not directly cause physical harm or spread literal diseases to Macbeth or any other characters, their prophecies “infect” Macbeth with a desire for power that ultimately leads to his downfall. This “infection” then spreads to Lady Macbeth, and manifests itself in the form of a literal illness by the end of the play -- albeit a mental affliction rather than a physical one. Although the witches only communicate with Macbeth to inform him of their prophecy and do not appear to have any direct control over his actions, one brief encounter is enough to cause catastrophe, in the same sense that one brief interaction with a person infected with the bubonic plague or COVID-19 can lead to serious illness or even death. The witches are an embodiment of Galen’s theory of “seeds of plague”, or the idea that external factors as small or seemingly insignificant as seeds can enter the body and cause infection and imbalance.¹⁹⁷ They themselves are the “seed” that ultimately spreads social unrest to Scotland on a much larger scale.

III. Multisensory Technology, Sociopolitical Unrest, and the Supernatural

On the whole, *The Show Must Go Online*’s creators made good use of sound design in their productions, with a dedicated sound designer on the production team. The sound design in *Macbeth* was particularly complex, with a wide variety of sound effects used to enhance the performance. In the post-show Q&A session, the production’s

¹⁹³ Johnston, “Go Touch His Life”, 66.

¹⁹⁴ Johnston, “Go Touch His Life”, 66.

¹⁹⁵ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, I.iii.19-10.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, I.iii.23.

¹⁹⁷ Margaret Healy, *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England*. (Palgrave, 2001), 21.

director Rob Myles describes the production as “one of the most ambitious, if not the most ambitious [...] week that TSMGO is likely to face”¹⁹⁸ in terms of sound design. The production’s sound designer Adam Gibson says that the process was “a bizarre, bizarre week”, but that creating the sound effects for the witches’ scenes (which will be discussed in more detail in subsequent paragraphs) were the most interesting and enjoyable parts of the process. Although this is not discussed in detail in the Q&A, the show also featured clips of ominous music at the start of certain scenes, as well as sound effects such as thunder or drums to set a dark and gloomy ambience for the production. Although the production had limited options for set and costume designs given the project’s fast turnaround time and limited budget, as well as participants’ lack of access to brick-and-mortar stores, the production team was able to use sound design as a way to establish the setting, create an atmosphere for the play, and highlight the story’s supernatural elements.

One of the more prevalent uses of sound design in *The Show Must Go Online*’s *Macbeth* is in the witches’ scenes (played by Dana Demsko, Rebecca Brincat, and Jenny Lu), which feature a reverb effect that distorts their voices. The effect is subtle at times, but pronounced enough to suggest an echo, as if they’re speaking from far away or from somewhere deep in the ground. In the witches’ first appearance in Act I, scene i, each actor has their camera zoomed in on one part of their face: starting with the First and Third Witches’ eyes and the Second Witch’s mouth, and then moving to all three witches’ mouths for the scene’s final lines. For the first part of the scene, the placement of the actors’ Zoom windows creates the effect of a Picasso-esque distorted face, with a mouth in the upper right corner where an eye should be, the right eye on the upper left side of the face, and the left eye at the bottom where the mouth should be. This placement may have been incidental, since Zoom’s functionality makes it difficult to pre-determine the arrangement of windows on the screen—but regardless, it gave the witches the appearance of being components of a larger-than-life, otherworldly figure, but also individual beings at the same time. Their disembodied appearance as individuals causes them to appear joined together as one solid unit when viewed together as a whole, with different parts of the face belonging to each witch. In the witches’ next appearance in Act I, scene iii, the witches’ cameras are zoomed out to a more typical “portrait” orientation and the audience can now see their whole faces. This makes the witches appear somewhat more human for

¹⁹⁸ Rob Myles, *The Show Must Go Online: Macbeth*, YouTube, 7 October 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAAI_c65nZY&t=1435s, 2:48:01.

their first meeting with Macbeth, but also gives them an otherworldly shapeshifting quality when viewed in direct succession with their previous disembodied appearance. A fourth Zoom window appears for the first few seconds that shows footage of smoke or vapour, suggesting that the witches have just materialised out of thin air or perhaps emerged out of the fog. In the final few lines before Macbeth and Banquo appear, the witches perform a brief choreography with the cameras zoomed back in, but on their hands instead of their faces this time. In this case, the Zoom window's limited scope serves as an advantage for the production's visual effects: by zooming in on one small part of an actor's body, the viewer is forced to focus their attention on that one area. (In a later scene, a similar effect is used by zooming in on Lady Macbeth's mouth and Macbeth's ear, to indicate that she's whispering in his ear.) In the case of the witches in *The Show Must Go Online's Macbeth*, this effect is taken to the extreme, giving the appearance that the witches are transforming from beings recognisable as human into a fully sentient hand, eye, or mouth.

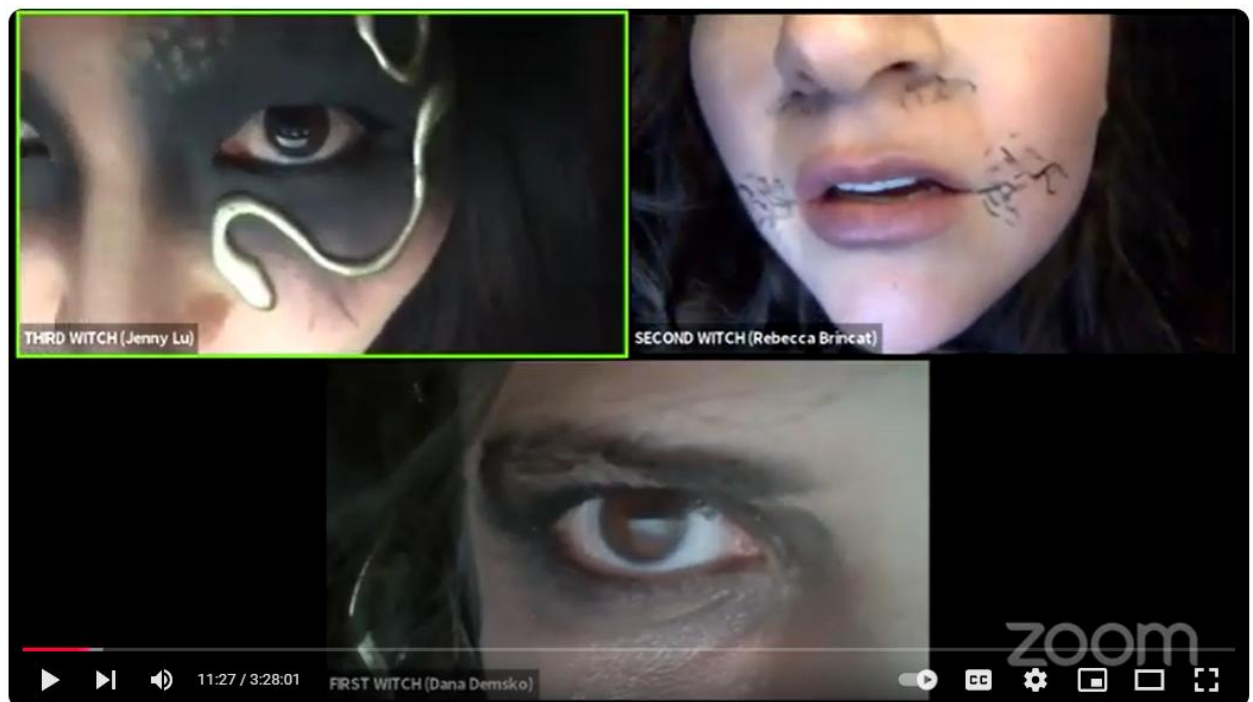


Image description: A screenshot taken from Act I, scene i of the play, showing the placement of the witches as described in the paragraph above. Top row left to right: Third Witch (Jenny Lu), Second Witch (Rebecca Brincat). Bottom row: First Witch (Dana Demsko). (Source: Rob Myles, *The Show Must Go Online: Macbeth*, YouTube, 7 October 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAAI_c65nZY&t=1435s, 11:27.)

As a performance platform, Zoom lends itself particularly well to productions that feature elements of horror or the supernatural, due to its ability to present actors in a way that is separate from their physical bodies. This creates an additional layer of separation between performance and reality, allowing for supernatural figures to appear disembodied, or to at least have more control over which aspects of their physical form the audience can see and interact with (as is demonstrated by the close-up camera views discussed in the previous paragraph). The potential audiovisual errors that can occur on a virtual platform, while not necessarily intentional, can also add to this sense of otherworldliness. Reflecting on the rise of Zoom as a communication platform, Darryl Jones writes in his book *Horror: A Very Short Introduction* that “the word ‘medium’ [in reference to Zoom] is telling here, as the disembodied, spectral nature of the experience often feels like conducting a séance: Are you there? Can you hear me? I can’t see you. Give me a sign. Like ghosts, we are slipping away from our bodily moorings”.¹⁹⁹ Unlike face-to-face interaction, communication via Zoom is dependent on the platform and internet signal both working as intended, with the looming and ever-present possibility that the connection could be lost at any time. This sense of instability is reminiscent of Macbeth’s response to the witches’ abrupt disappearance in Act I, scene iii: “Into the air; and what seem’d corporal melted,/As breath into the wind. Would they had stay’d!”²⁰⁰ In this sense, Zoom is a fitting platform for portrayals of ethereal beings such as the Three Witches: they can disappear instantaneously, either by deliberately turning off their camera or by external factors like internet connectivity issues or a problem with Zoom itself. The internet and its inherent instability are the forces by which the witches can “[make] themselves air, into which they vanish’d”.²⁰¹

In Act II, scene i, the witches make a brief appearance through the use of auditory effects: when Banquo says that “I dreamt last night of the three Weird Sisters”,²⁰² the witches can be heard saying, with the same audio distortion effect that is used on their voices during the rest of their scenes, “Show his eyes and grieve his heart / Come like shadows; so depart!”²⁰³ This line typically doesn’t appear until Act IV, scene i in the text, and it is repeated again during that scene in this version, but its extratextual appearance in

¹⁹⁹ Darryl Jones, *Horror: A Very Brief Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 126.

²⁰⁰ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, I.iii.81-82.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, I.v.1.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, II.i.25.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, IV.i.121-122. (Note that in this version of the play, the line also appears in II.i.

this case foreshadows the reappearance of the witches later in the play. The witches are heard but not seen in this instance, and their disembodied voices add to the ethereal, shapeshifting, and otherworldly qualities established through the use of sound effects and camera angles in their earlier scenes. The use of their voices in this way makes them seem ever-present in the world of the play, observing or even intervening from afar even when they're not visible onscreen. Again, the virtually-mediated performance space lends itself well to such effects; as previously mentioned, the use of cameras allows for characters to disappear and reappear abruptly, but in this case it is apparent that characters can partially appear through the use of their voices as well.

As with any digitally mediated production, *The Show Must Go Online's* broadcasts faced the risk of technical glitches and other unplanned incidents related to the format, which—intentional or not—contributed toward the auditory profile of the production. This risk was especially prominent for actors working out of their homes, since most people do not have the professional-grade audiovisual equipment often used in livestreamed theatre, and were instead using the cameras and microphones on their personal computers. Internet connectivity also varied from person to person, with some participants having faster speeds than others. This created issues with the audio at certain points throughout the production: most notably, the Porter's microphone cuts in and out during their scene, making their dialogue difficult to understand at times. (The production did have swings in place in the event of a serious technical issue or other last-minute emergency on any of the actors' parts;²⁰⁴ however, none of the technical issues in *Macbeth* rose to a level that would require the actor to be replaced.) Despite this, although these audio issues appear to be unintentional, they do contribute to the overall mood of the scene by creating a disconcerting and unbalanced effect for the viewer. The Porter's voice, which at times sounds distorted with bursts of static in between, no longer follows a typical speech cadence and instead sounds irregular and choppy. Their voice sounds, in the words of the Old Man in Act II scene iv, “unnatural / Even like the deed that's done”,²⁰⁵ and highlights the external factors at play that may impact an audience member's experience of the production. Additionally, when I turned on subtitles as I was watching the production on my personal computer, the subtitles displayed on the screen did not align with the lines being spoken at the time, adding another sense of

²⁰⁴ *The Show Must Go Online: Macbeth*, 2:43:33.

²⁰⁵ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, II.iv.10-11.

disjointedness to the play. (This problem did not come up when I tried watching it on a different device, suggesting that this would not have been an issue for every viewer watching with subtitles, but it impacted my own viewing experience nonetheless.) These technical glitches, although erroneous in nature, contribute to the unsettled nature of the setting and characters, and highlight the sense of things not being as they should be.

That said, the production team behind *The Show Must Go Online* did not purposely encourage technical glitches, and at times went out of their way to avoid them - specifically with regard to the use of virtual backgrounds. Virtual backgrounds are a Zoom feature that allows the user to replace the background of their camera window with an image of their choosing using an effect similar to a greenscreen. This can serve a practical purpose for people working from home who may wish to conceal any glimpses into their households that may be visible in the background (especially during lockdown, when many people were quickly thrust into a work-from-home situation without enough warning to set up a professional-looking space), but for the purposes of Zoom theatre, it allowed performers to create a “set” in the background of their screen without having to physically construct a real one. Unfortunately, however, these backgrounds were prone to glitches and did not always appear perfect on camera: the “greenscreen” effect tends to work much better with an actual greenscreen, and any movement or changes in lighting could cause the actual background to peek through the virtual backdrop or distort the shape of the subject’s body. Additionally, even when the effect worked as well as could be expected, it could be difficult to match the lighting on the subject’s face with that of the background, which only served to highlight the effect’s artificiality. For these reasons, *The Show Must Go Online*’s production team opted not to use virtual backgrounds, choosing instead to have the actors show their actual homes in the background.²⁰⁶ Myles and Pye write:

We believe wholeheartedly that Shakespeare works best when both the actors and their characters know the audience is there and choose to work with them; that they occupy the same space, practically, physically, and emotionally. If this is the case,

²⁰⁶ Robert Myles and Valerie Clayman Pye, *Innovation and Digital Theatremaking: Rethinking Theatre with The Show Must Go Online* (Routledge, 2024), 125-130.

then what better way to *parallel* the properties of shared space and shared light than *being honest with the audience* and having our actors perform their pieces in their unadorned bedrooms and living rooms? The *very same place* the audience was watching from? [...] In doing so, we could acknowledge the reality in which we were telling these stories - at home, often in lockdown, and create a shared experience through our digital connection.²⁰⁷

The project's creators chose to favor the authenticity of displaying the actors' homes rather than the glitchy artificiality of virtual backgrounds, a choice that (as was the case with *Sofa Shakespeare*) highlighted the conditions under which the productions were made and reminded the audience that the actors were most likely in the same situation they were in. It is a surprisingly and refreshingly low-tech option in a project whose existence is otherwise largely dependent on twenty-first-century technology, and the sense of "shared space" is implied even though the backgrounds don't tend to match exactly. However, this deliberate avoidance of technical glitches makes it all the more apparent when certain unintentional glitches inevitably slip through the cracks. In a play like *Macbeth*, this effect is not a negative one: in fact, I argue that it mirrors the ways in which chaos and disorder infiltrate the world of the play, despite the characters' best intentions.

Big Telly's *Macbeth*, another version of the play presented on Zoom in October 2020 (the same month as *The Show Must Go Online*'s version), also includes a number of technical glitches that, intentionally or not, contribute to the overall mood of the play and at times enhance the play's unsettled nature. Unlike *The Show Must Go Online*, Big Telly's version of the play included a combination of live and pre-recorded material, and even had audience members appear onscreen as background characters in certain scenes - a feature that will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Somewhat unsurprisingly, these various elements did not always blend together as smoothly as they might in an in-person production; however, some viewers saw this as a feature that enhanced the production. In a chapter discussing this work in *Early Modern Liveness*, Thomas Cartelli states that "the predictable consequences of having actors record themselves in physical and tonal isolation from one another converge to generate a home-movie aesthetic that takes the chill out of the coolness of a medium founded on

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

remoteness”.²⁰⁸ To Cartelli, the patchwork nature of the production feels humanising rather than (or perhaps in addition to) disorganised or disjointed, and it justifies “allowing [...] performers to express themselves in a range of styles”.²⁰⁹ Because the production is inherently incohesive, there is no need to create a cohesive style for the production; or rather, this blend of different styles is itself the throughline that takes the performance from a collection of disjointed scenes to a singular work. (The works of Sofa Shakespeare discussed in the previous chapter employ a similar strategy.)

This (again, perhaps unintentional) use of technical glitches in portrayals of supernatural Shakespearean characters is also present in the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 2016 production of *The Tempest*, directed by Gregory Doran, in which the spirit Ariel was portrayed by a three-dimensional wire-mesh projection controlled by a live actor, Mark Quartley, wearing a motion-capture suit. As with *The Show Must Go Online*, the virtual elements of the production did not always run as smoothly as intended, and Ariel’s projected image was prone to visual bugs and glitches. Pascale Aebischer argues in her chapter “‘Tech-Enabled’ Theatre at the RSC: Digital Performance and Gregory Doran’s *Tempest* (RSC, 2016)” that these glitches were ultimately a detriment to the production as a whole.²¹⁰ Because the technology used was still in its early stages and required very delicate hardware, Aebischer argues, the limitations it presented for the live actor—for instance, a very limited range of motion and difficulty in moving without disrupting the sensors—outweighed the benefits of the visual spectacle afforded by the technology. Aebischer writes that “Almost any unanticipated human motion could make the technology glitch, emphasising the material contingencies of the digital object and the process of its production as it did so”.²¹¹ Although the technological effects were intended to position Ariel on the supernatural plane and set him apart as a different, more powerful being than the human characters in the play, the glitches had the opposite effect in Aebischer’s view: they only served to remind the audience that he was a human actor whose appearance was only being augmented by flawed technology designed by other humans.

²⁰⁸ Thomas Cartelli, “Medium specificity, medium convergence and aliveness in the chromakey (2018) and Big Telly Zoom (2020) *Macbeths*, in *Early Modern Liveness: Mediating Presence in Text, Stage and Screen*, ed. Danielle Rosvally and Donovan Sherman (Bloomsbury, 2023), 78-79.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

²¹⁰ Pascale Aebischer, *Shakespeare, Spectatorship and the Technologies of Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 131.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 132

Aebischer's example demonstrates that these sorts of technical glitches do not always serve the production in a positive way, but I argue that the use of a fully-virtual platform in productions like *The Show Must Go Online* changes the equation somewhat. Because all of the actors appear on a screen (as opposed to the combination of live and digitally-mediated actors in productions like the RSC's *Tempest*), the technical glitches are not attached to one particular character, and are instead a condition of the whole environment in which the play takes place. They appear as something that is being done *to* the character, rather than something inherent to the character themselves. To return to Jones' analogy, the seance-like atmosphere afforded by Zoom is enhanced by the platform's inherent unpredictability: there is an ever-present threat of losing the connection, and the story itself feels precarious and uncertain.

Of course, *The Show Must Go Online* is far from being the first or only company to innovate with sound design in a production of *Macbeth*. As Kavita Mudan Finn discusses in the production's pre-show educational talk,²¹² there is evidence that suggests some of *Macbeth*'s earliest performances may have been performed by candlelight, meaning that sound would likely have been a crucial element to the performance, given the limited visibility for audience members. A 2018 adaptation of the play called *Shakespeare in the Dark: Macbeth*, performed in Austin, Texas and co-produced by Past Is Prologue Productions and the Filigree Theatre, continues this tradition to a more intense degree by performing the play in pitch blackness, with the audience hearing sounds and dialogue from audio speakers and live actors placed throughout the space. Because the audience wasn't able to see the set, the physical environment had to be established in other ways – namely, sound design. The play's promotional material states that “The removal of visual overstimulation leads to a state of sensory deprivation, leading audience members to appreciate why Shakespeare is still performed 400 years after his death: it's all about the language”.²¹³ Although *The Show Must Go Online*'s format does, of course, allow for visual imagery, sound design is similarly important when there is no large theatrical spectacle to hold the audience's attention. The production's sound designer, Emily Duncan Wilson, says in an article for *American Theatre* by Caroline Macon Fleischer that “We established the difference between Macbeth and Macduff's castles with sound. In Macbeth's castle, there was an ominous,

²¹² *The Show Must Go Online: Macbeth*, 0:1:49

²¹³ “Shakespeare in the Dark: Macbeth”, Do512, accessed 5th November 2024, <https://do512.com/shakespeareinthedarkmacbeth>.

slow dripping. In Macduff's, there was a crackling fireplace".²¹⁴ As with *The Show Must Go Online*'s entire crew, Wilson also worked remotely on the production, although this was because of geographic constraints rather than public health concerns, since the production predated the start of the COVID-19 lockdowns by about a year and a half. Although remote work was not as necessary in 2018 as it was in 2020 and 2021, productions like this one were beginning to pave the way toward new understandings of how remote work can not only be workable in a theatrical context, but also allow for opportunities that wouldn't have otherwise existed.

In addition to portrayals of the supernatural, sound design is also utilised in *The Show Must Go Online*'s *Macbeth* to indicate a tone shift or to clue the audience into a character's mental or emotional state. For example, Act I, scene iv features no sound effects aside from the dialogue (aside from the inevitable background noises that are occasionally picked up by the actors' microphones as consequence of recording from their homes) until Macbeth's aside at the end of the scene when he realises that he must kill both Duncan and Malcolm in order to become king and fulfill the witches' prophecy:

The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step
On which I must fall down or else o'erleap,
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires;
Let not light see my black and deep desires.
The eye wink at the hand, yet let that be
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.²¹⁵

At this point in the scene, there is a subtle ambient droning sound in the background, punctuated by the sound of a creaking door, that is silenced once Macbeth's line ends. This effect indicates a change in the mood of the scene: while everyone else is celebrating the news that the former Thane of Cawdor has been executed and commending Macbeth on his victory, Macbeth is contemplating the murder of the current heir to the throne. More crucially, this represents a turning point for Macbeth as a character: not only has he realised that the prophecy will not be fulfilled without action on his part, but he has revealed to the audience (and perhaps to himself) that he is willing to take any measures

²¹⁴ Caroline Macon Fleischer, "Zounds, What Sounds!: A Roundup of Designs that Pushed the Sonic and Theatrical Envelope," *American Theatre* July/August 2019, 16-19; 70.

²¹⁵ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, I.iv.55-60.

up to and including murder to make it happen. The contrast between Macbeth as a celebrated hero and Macbeth as a cold-blooded murderer is of course indicated primarily via the text, but this subtle use of sound effects further emphasises Macbeth's dark thoughts and intentions. In turn, the abrupt cessation of this sound effect when Macbeth's speech ends brings the viewer back to the celebratory atmosphere of the scene, which appears somewhat jarring and incongruous after learning what Macbeth has just revealed. Because Zoom as a platform severely limits the use of lighting or blocking to indicate an aside or a tone shift, sound design in this case is an effective means of setting the mood and conveying a character's intentions and thoughts.

A similar effect can be seen in the following scene, when Lady Macbeth (played by Katrina Allen) makes her first appearance, reading the letter in which Macbeth first tells her about the witches' prophecy. She appears dressed entirely in red (perhaps in reference to the "blood on her hands" that will be revealed later), with the sound of thunder and strong winds playing in the background. The sound effect serves a practical purpose by indicating the dark and gloomy setting of the play, but also suggests Lady Macbeth's inner turmoil. While Macbeth may have some remaining guilt and reservations about the prospect of murdering Malcolm and Duncan (although those feelings are quickly diminishing, as indicated by the previous scene), Lady Macbeth has no doubts and is only worried about her husband's potential cowardice. As the scene progresses and Lady Macbeth's determination intensifies, the sound of wind becomes louder and is accompanied by the sound of trumpets, as if she is riding into battle. Lady Macbeth's hair also appears windblown (probably from a fan placed offscreen), which enhances these sound effects and makes them appear more real. When combined, these audiovisual effects illustrate Lady Macbeth's emotional turmoil, reflecting her internal thoughts in her external environment.

IV. The Actor's Voice and Acoustic Diversity

Although *The Show Must Go Online's Macbeth* featured a heavier use of artificial or pre-recorded sound effects than most of the project's other productions, the actors' voices remain the most crucial element of the play's auditory profile. Given the fact that sight and sound are the only two sensory elements that can be conveyed via Zoom, the project's production team were very deliberate about this aspect of the play, not just in terms of line delivery, but also in terms of the sound of the actors' voices themselves.

The auditory profile of *The Show Must Go Online* is not limited to artificial sound design elements, but also includes the sound of the actors' own speaking voices: actors were encouraged to speak in their natural accents, even when it was incongruous with the play's setting or their character's nationality. This was intended to highlight the diversity of the productions (all of which had international casts), as well as challenge existing (often elitist) assumptions about which accents "belong" in a Shakespearean setting. Myles and Pye explain the rationale for this decision in *Innovation and Digital Theatremaking* as follows: "Driving everyone toward the fundamentally *unreal* RP [Received Pronunciation] of the ruling classes contributes to the sanitising of what theatre is and who it is for—it creates tacit endorsement for the privileged and their privileges, and for a more unequal society. So when *TSMGO* created its very first show, we knew we wanted to maximise the sound palette of the show, as an open invitation to people from all corners".²¹⁶ *The Show Must Go Online's Macbeth* included some Scottish accents as the play's setting suggests, but mainly consisted of American, English, and Australian accents among others. In the post-show question-and-answer period, which is the only time during the stream that the audience is able to see and hear the actors out of character, it becomes apparent that the actors did not change their accents to fit their characters (with the exception of the Porter's monologue in Act II scene iii, in which actor Nat Kennedy does an exaggerated Scottish accent and an impression of US President Donald Trump for comedic effect). The accents depicted in the show are, for the most part, an accurate representation of the diversity of the cast.

The Show Must Go Online is not unique in its use of diverse accents in Shakespearean performance, and is in fact part of a movement away from treating RP as the "standard" for Shakespeare and other media, which has been gaining traction since the second half of the twentieth century.²¹⁷ Sonia Massai discusses this phenomenon in her book *Shakespeare's Accents*, and attributes it at least in part to the increasing popularity of Shakespearean performance outside of England and especially in non-English-speaking parts of the world. Massai describes this as the "connection between the alienating, but also liberating, experience of hearing Shakespeare performed in a foreign language and the growing acoustic diversity deployed in English productions of

²¹⁶ Myles and Pye, *Innovation and Digital Theatremaking*, 48.

²¹⁷ Sonia Massai, *Shakespeare's Accents: Voicing Identity in Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 19.

Shakespeare aimed at English-speaking audiences”.²¹⁸ The Show Must Go Online’s focus leans more heavily toward having a diversity of accents than on incorporating foreign languages, although other works discussed in this thesis—namely Sofa Shakespeare—did invite non-English-speaking actors to translate their lines into their native language. Because neither project was bound by geographic constraints when casting actors, both were able to easily incorporate a wide range of accents, dialects, and sometimes even languages – another positive aspect of the projects’ online format, and one that would likely have been much more difficult to execute had they been limited to local actors only. Despite the fact that lockdown restrictions isolated many actors and audience members to their households and their immediate local community, online productions allowed for connections that weren’t limited by geography. This is reflected in the diversity of accents and language (or “acoustic diversity”, as Massai puts it) within the productions, and the global nature of works produced during this time.

V. Sound and Adaptation: *Sleep No More* (2011-2024) and Donmar Warehouse’s *Macbeth* (2023-present)

Another production that highlights the use of sound design and other multisensory elements in *Macbeth* is Punchdrunk Productions’ *Sleep No More*, an immersive show adapted from the play that premiered in New York City in 2011 and closed in late 2024 after several extensions to its run. The show, which is set in the 1930s in a fictional Scottish hotel called the McKittrick, is performed in a five-story building that the audience may explore throughout the show’s roughly three-hour run time. The audience is largely free to interact with the set, travel between locations, and observe the actors as they choose, but within certain parameters designed to maintain the illusion and guide the story: for instance, certain rooms are off-limits unless an audience member is invited to enter by a cast member, and audience members are instructed not to speak to the actors or even to one another. *Sleep No More* includes very little spoken text; rather, the actors communicate primarily via dance and movement. In place of dialogue, other sound effects are used to establish the show’s setting and create ambience for different areas: for example, a room that is meant to look like a run-down mental hospital has a sound of dripping water in the background, and a dress shop has music playing with a “scratchy”

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

effect as if it's being played on an old phonograph. Several of the musical tracks featured in *Sleep No More* are taken from Alfred Hitchcock's films, many of which were sources of inspiration for the project.²¹⁹

Unlike many immersive productions, the audience in *Sleep No More* has little direct interaction with the cast and no influence on the outcome of the story. Although some audience members may occasionally be pulled into a scene or invited into a "one-on-one" encounter with an actor, these occurrences are rare and most audience members experience the production purely as spectators to the action. Audience members are given white full-face masks upon arrival that they are instructed to wear for the duration of the performance, which allow other participants to clearly distinguish between actors and audience members. The masks also allow audience members to experience the play in a state of relative anonymity, since they completely hide the wearer's face. (Audience members are very occasionally instructed to remove their masks in the aforementioned one-on-one encounters with the actors,²²⁰ but this only happens out of view of the rest of the audience.) Erin Sullivan compares the use of these masks to "the anonymizing possibilities of online platforms",²²¹ likening these literal masks to the digital "mask" of online personas: they create a layer of separation between the audience and the action of the play, much like how digital platforms such as Zoom can be used to manipulate the audience's ability to engage with the work or make their presence known (for example, by changing their display name, turning off their camera, or obscuring their face with a camera filter). In the case of *Sleep No More*, this sense of anonymity inadvertently encouraged and enabled some audience members to behave inappropriately with the actors,²²² necessitating the implementation of stricter policies to prevent these behaviours and protocols for reporting them after the fact. The Show Must Go Online, recognising the potential risk of performing on a platform that allows for spectator anonymity, made a pre-emptive effort to mitigate these issues by devising a protocol for audience members who are disruptive or behaving inappropriately: including banning disruptive audience members from participating in the live chat and, on rare occasions, responding as a

²¹⁹ D.J. Hopkins, *Sleep No More and the Discourses of Shakespearean Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 13.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

²²¹ Erin Sullivan, "Staging Digital Co-Presence: Punchdrunk's Hybrid *Sleep No More* (2012) and Pandemic-Informed Pedagogies," *Shakespeare Survey* 76 (2023), 26

²²² Hopkins, *Sleep No More and the Discourses of Shakespeare Performance*, 82-83.

production team to audience members who made comments that went very far against the project's intended values.²²³

This anonymisation of the audience and separation between actor and audience member goes beyond the use of masks. Audience members are also instructed not to speak to the actors or one another, and are encouraged (though not required) to separate from anyone they came with and experience the performance on their own. Though the audience is, in many ways, more able to interact with the characters and setting than they would be in a traditional production, there remains a clear delineation between the two worlds. In his book *Sleep No More and the Discourses of Shakespearean Performance*, D.J. Hopkins compares the audience to the presence of a ghost: "they are present, active, decision-making agents of the performance who are mostly ignored by the characters, a performance practice that reinforces the perception that we are just ghosts wandering the McKittrick".²²⁴ In a sense, this is the inverse of how audience interaction works in *The Show Must Go Online*: in that case, the audience is not physically there, but they are strongly encouraged to interact with each other via YouTube's live chat feature (or occasionally even interact directly with characters in the play), engage with the actors and production team in the post-show Q&A, and discuss the show beforehand and afterwards on social media. Audience members for *The Show Must Go Online* were even encouraged to apply to be in future shows, with the production team aiming to make the project as accessible as possible for those who want to participate.²²⁵ *Sleep No More* allowed for an extreme degree of physical presence while maintaining a very clear boundary between actor and audience member, whereas *The Show Must Go Online* lacked physical proximity but attempted to minimise this sense of separation through virtual interaction. Both situations, I argue, create this ghostlike audience presence that Hopkins describes: either physically there but barely acknowledged by the performers, or not physically there but still present in the virtual performance space.

Sleep No More relies heavily on modern-day technologies such as lighting, sound design, and even fragrances to build the world of the show; however, no computer, television, or phone screens are visible to the audience. The primary use of technology in the production is to emphasise and enhance the physical environment of the show, rather than draw attention to itself. Audience members are required to check in their cell phones

²²³ Myles and Pye, *Innovation and Digital Theatremaking*, 55.

²²⁴ Hopkins, *Sleep No More and the Discourses of Shakespeare Performance*, 38.

²²⁵ Myles and Pye, *Innovation and Digital Theatremaking*, 16.

at the door or keep them in locked bags, so as to minimise distractions and maintain the illusion of the 1930s setting (and, presumably, to prevent the audience from taking unauthorised photos or videos). Placing an emphasis on the up-close-and-personal nature of the audience's ability to move throughout the set and personalise their experience as they choose, the production is, by design, only able to be experienced live and in-person. However, some scholars argue that *Sleep No More* is still a product of a mediated culture, despite its emphasis on the immediate here and now. Erin Sullivan argues that the production's "choose your own adventure" style of audience engagement is influenced by first-person role-playing video games, in which the player is free to explore the world of the game in a similar manner to *Sleep No More*'s audiences. D.J. Hopkins makes a similar argument, citing the heavy influence of Alfred Hitchcock's films on the production: "the many citations from the films of Hitchcock serve as signposts to the presence of the cinematic imaginary and underscore the value of object technology to its spaces of performance".²²⁶ Though the production features no actual films or video games for the audience to see or interact with, the audience still enters the space with their own prior knowledge of this media, and the influences of these forms of media are a constant presence even though the media itself is absent from the work.

In 2012, eight years prior to the onset of COVID-19, *Sleep No More* was, for a brief period of time, adapted for the virtual space. Fourteen audience members at a live performance were invited to wear special masks that connected them to fourteen remote participants watching online. The online participants were able to communicate with their in-person counterparts via "portals" (i.e. set pieces that could display messages, such as self-typing typewriters) placed throughout the space, allowing viewers at home to directly interact with the production. Online players were also only able to see images of the rooms that their in-person partner had already been to, allowing the in-person attendee to have some influence over the online viewer's experience as well. Unfortunately, however, the experiment received poor reviews and was not ultimately considered to be a success. According to Dave Itzkoff, a *New York Times* reporter who attended this version of the production, attendees who were matched with an online counterpart weren't fully informed about how the system worked, or even that they'd been matched with a partner in the first place. Itzkoff writes that "I didn't know that I'd been traveling on Thursday night with a companion of sorts," and that he didn't realise that the messages displayed in

²²⁶ Hopkins, *Sleep No More and the Discourses of Shakespeare Performance*, 79.

the “portals” were being written and delivered directly to him in real time by a fellow audience member, rather than pre-written messages that could appear to any audience member.²²⁷ Reviews from the online participants were also largely negative, citing various tech issues as well as the fact that the virtual platform lacked the sense of immersion that *Sleep No More* is known for.²²⁸ To date, a hybrid version of the show has not been attempted again, with the production closing entirely during the period of COVID-19 lockdowns in New York. According to Erin Sullivan in an article for *Shakespeare Survey*, “what meant the most to online audience members was not the opportunity to look at aspects of the online performance at a distance, but rather the chance to interact directly, and even intimately, with someone else for an extended period of time”.²²⁹ While online platforms can, to an extent, replicate at least some of the audiovisual experience of watching an in-person production, experiments such as the hybrid version of *Sleep No More* suggest that audience members crave the interpersonal, collective experience of watching a play alongside other audience members—and special attention must be given to replicating this feeling in the virtual space. This is arguably even more important in situations like lockdown, in which audience members are not always as able to seek those interpersonal connections elsewhere. Community-focused online theatre projects like The Show Must Go Online address this issue somewhat by placing a heavy emphasis on opportunities to interact directly with actors and other audience members, such as the live chat, the post-show Q&A sessions, and maintaining a presence in social media platforms like Twitter or Facebook.

Another recent example of innovative use of sound design in *Macbeth* is the Donmar Warehouse’s production of the play, currently running in London and starring David Tennant. Audience members are given earpieces at the start of the play, which are connected to the actors’ microphones. The earpieces allow the actors to speak softly and even whisper, while still being audible to the audience members. Because the audio is transmitted directly to the earpieces rather than using traditional speakers that project to the whole room, audience members can feel as though the actors are whispering directly to them or like they’re eavesdropping on a private conversation. The earpieces also magnify other non-verbal sound effects used in the production: a review by Arifa Akbar

²²⁷ Dave Itzkoff, “A guinea pig’s night at the theatre,” *The New York Times* (2012), cited in Sullivan, “Staging Digital Co-Presence”, 27.

²²⁸ Sullivan, “Staging Digital Co-Presence”, 27.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

from *The Guardian* says that “Sound, in Shakespeare’s text, has great disturbing significance. That is made manifest here. The 3D headphones magnify every creak and whimper. We hear the cold clink of metal as Lady Macbeth [played by Cush Jumbo] snatches the daggers with which Macbeth has killed Duncan (Benny Young) to return them to the crime scene”.²³⁰ By amplifying the sounds that would normally be barely audible (or not perceptible at all) to the audience, the audience is made to feel more intimately close with the events of the play. However, this mediatisation of the sounds in the play can also have a distancing effect on the audience, causing them to feel both closer to and distanced from the action. Akbar’s review also states that “Paradoxically, hearing the dialogue through headphones brings intimacy but one reminiscent of film with an augmented Dolby sound, as if these characters are not talking in real time”.²³¹

A less positive review of the play also references the distancing effect of the earpieces: Nick Curtis writes for *The Standard* that “this is like listening to a very good audio production of *Macbeth* while watching very good actors mime to it. Interesting, but not something you’d necessarily choose to experience”.²³² As with *The Show Must Go Online* and other digitally-mediated theatre from the lockdown era, these measures of bridging the distance between actor and audience member can create a sense of closeness, but nevertheless remain artificial; and can at times only serve to emphasise this sense of distance, by reminding the viewer that they are not in fact able to interact directly with the performer.

As with *The Show Must Go Online*’s *Macbeth*, the Donmar Warehouse’s version of the play is especially deliberate about sound design in scenes involving the three witches. In the Donmar Warehouse’s case, the witches don’t appear onstage in their physical form at all; instead, their presence is purely auditory and voiced by various other members of the cast rather than specific actors. This effect is described by *The Guardian* as “an ingenious way to suggest that they represent the ever-present murderous voice in Macbeth’s head”.²³³ (Although *The Show Must Go Online* does show the witches

²³⁰ Arifa Akbar, “*Macbeth* review - David Tennant thrills in this high-concept production,” *The Guardian*, The Guardian, 16 December 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2023/dec/16/macbeth-review-david-tennant-thrills-in-this-high-concept-production>

²³¹ Akbar, “*Macbeth* review”.

²³² Nick Curtis, “*Macbeth* at the Donmar Warehouse review: David Tennant is magnificent, so why sex it up with headphones?”, *The Standard*, The London Standard, 18 December 2023, <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/theatre/macbeth-donmar-warehouse-review-david-tennant-cush-jumbo-b1127257.html>

²³³ Akbar, “*Macbeth* review”.

onscreen, their version of the production also uses a similar voice-over effect in Banquo's description of his dream in Act II, scene i, as discussed in a previous section.) The Show Must Go Online's version doesn't go quite this far – the witches do appear onscreen – but the distorted reverb effect on their voices does create a sense that they're speaking from another world or on another plane of reality. Additionally, the effect created by zooming in on different parts of their faces creates a disembodied effect not entirely unlike the Donmar Warehouse's version: although the audience can see the witches, their presence is ever-changing and otherworldly. They are physically visible, but their form can change at any time, and the virtual format allows them to disappear at (quite literally) the click of a button. Both productions allow the witches to remain ambiguous in their physical forms, emphasising their ability to pass between the physical and the metaphysical; or, in the case of the Donmar Warehouse version, prompting the audience to question whether the witches exist in reality or just in Macbeth's conscience. Their voices are what primarily connects them to the audience and anchors them to the environment of the play.

VI. Conclusion

By analysing the use of audiovisual elements in The Show Must Go Online's *Macbeth* and other technologically-mediated versions of the play, it is apparent that The Show Must Go Online's use of these elements is part of a long-standing tradition of using technology – including technological glitches – as a means of portraying the sociopolitical turmoil and the supernatural elements present in the play. In terms of both artificial sound effects and the actors' own voices, the sound design in the production is able to counterbalance the distancing effects of Zoom by creating an auditory atmosphere that sets the stage for the characters' inner turmoil and external circumstances. Additionally, the use of camera angles, coordinating costumes, and Zoom window arrangement afford the production a unique visual language that is enhanced by Zoom's capabilities as a platform. By comparing this production to past adaptations of the play as well as future versions created after lockdown, The Show Must Go Online's *Macbeth* can be positioned within the broader history of using *Macbeth* as a canvas for multisensory theatre. This production proves that Shakespearean works created during lockdown are not just a means of creating online community (although they are effective at that as well), but also works with artistic merit in and of themselves.

Chapter 4: *Hamlet's Virtual Ghosts: Preserving the Past, Engaging the Present, and Informing the Future*

I. Introduction

The previous case studies discussed in this thesis are primarily concerned with the live or immediate aspects of the productions in question: the communities that arose via social media in Sofa Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and the multisensory experience of watching The Show Must Go Online's *Macbeth* during their initial "live" broadcasts. However, the online performance platforms utilised in both Sofa Shakespeare and The Show Must Go Online have the advantage of remaining available to audience members after the productions have been initially broadcast, and remain available to watch on YouTube at the time of writing. Although lockdown has concluded and live, in-person theatre is once again possible, the productions still exist as a snapshot of life during lockdown, and the "ghosts" of the live productions remain – both in the recordings of the productions themselves, and in the largely intact records of the audience members' commentary and interactions with one another on social media and in YouTube comments and live chats. Unlike recordings of in-person productions, which for the most part lose any concrete record of the audience's participation, productions such as these ones that are made for virtual audiences can organically preserve not only the plays themselves, but the reactions of audience members in real time or immediately before or after the live stream. This is encapsulated by The Show Must Go Online's motto of "Shakespeare for everyone, for free, forever": by preserving the productions in a way that is very close to viewing experience of the original streams, both projects generated an archive of material that serve as both a time capsule of the past and a valuable resource for the future.

Of course, it is impossible to replicate the experience of a live performance that has already concluded: truly live theatre is, by definition, only available in the moment that it's happening. The recordings do not allow for the opportunity to participate in conversations with other audience members (except via YouTube comments, but those lack the immediacy of live commentary and do not always receive replies), and the ability to pause, rewind, and fast-forward means that the audience has more control over the pacing of their viewing experience – which many viewers may view as a feature and not a bug, but it is distinctly different from a real-time live stream that does not allow for breaks or skipping ahead. There is no communal experience of watching the performance

alongside others around the world—even if those other audience members wouldn't have been visible to one another even during the initial streams. However, what the recordings do offer is the opportunity to experience the production with the former audience members appearing as a “ghostlike presence” via their remaining comments, reactions, and what YouTube refers to as “live chat” messages - although they are of course no longer live themselves, but rather remains of that initial liveness.

The ability to preserve these productions isn't just valuable to future viewers from an entertainment perspective; it's also information that can be used to inform similar productions in the future. Rob Myles and Valerie Clayman Pye write in *Innovation and Digital Theatremaking* that “every decision we made was tested in a live environment and our metrics were the kind of thing that TV producers would pay market research companies huge sums of money for—instant quantitative feedback”.²³⁴ YouTube's metadata on each video allows the viewer to see how many viewers tuned into each production both during the livestream and after the fact, track the number of views over time, and sometimes even see a timestamped graph of which moments in the show were viewed the most (although the latter is sometimes only visible to the YouTube account holder). In addition to the very valuable quantitative data that Myles and Pye refer to here, the qualitative data from the live chat, YouTube comments, and social media communities that arose out of both projects was largely immediate as well. As Ayanna Thompson puts it in her paper “Unmooring the Moor: Researching and Teaching on YouTube”, published in *Shakespeare Quarterly* in 2010, “The key feature of YouTube is not passive viewing but response and dialogue”²³⁵—and the community engagement with both of these works is a testament to this idea that remains visible to this day. This kind of feedback is, as Myles and Pye say, able to be received much more immediately than it would be with most other traditional forms of media—but it's also information that continues to be readily available months or years after the fact. For theatre-makers who wish to follow a similar model in the future, either as a creative choice or out of necessity should theatres close on this broad of a scale again, the availability of this sort of data can be used to inform such projects. The Show Must Go Online and Sofa Shakespeare were not only important contributions to the field of virtual Shakespearean performance while

²³⁴ Rob Myles and Valerie Clayman Pye, *Innovation and Digital Theatremaking: Rethinking Theatre with The Show Must Go Online* (Routledge, 2024), 10.

²³⁵ Ayanna Thompson, “Unmooring the Moor: Researching and Teaching on YouTube,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2010), 337-356, 338.

the projects were active, but also serve as valuable sources of information that are uniquely positioned to inform the future. For the purposes of this case study, I have chosen both projects' respective versions of *Hamlet*, given the play's themes of social contagion, its "viral" nature in the cultural lexicon, and the presence of an onstage ghost who embodies the past. In the world of online Shakespearean performance during COVID-19, *Hamlet*'s ghosts exist both on and off the stage.

II. Ghosts and Plagues in *Hamlet*

Hamlet is a prime example for a case study that demonstrates the past, present, and potential future of virtual Shakespearean performance during disease outbreaks. First performed in or around 1601, the play preceded one of the most severe plague outbreaks of Shakespeare's lifetime by around two years, and was written roughly twelve years after another large outbreak in 1589. Although the play was not written in the immediate aftermath of a large-scale outbreak, the plague (and death in general) was still a looming threat in Shakespeare's London – his own son, Hamnet, had died around five years prior in 1596, although it is unknown whether he died of the plague or of other causes.²³⁶ (Some fictional works such as Maggie O'Farrell's 2020 novel *Hamnet* work off of the assumption that he died of the plague, and although the prevalence of the plague in late-16th-century London means that this likely could have been the case, it has neither been confirmed nor disproven by the historical record.) Severe outbreaks were a relatively recent memory in Shakespeare's past at the time the play was being written, and another outbreak was possible – even likely – in the very near future (a worry that would soon become a reality in 1603). This presents a parallel with audiences viewing the play today, in the relatively recent aftermath of the COVID-19 lockdowns: although the disease is not the immediate threat that it was in 2020 or 2021, it has not been anywhere near eradicated and the world has not fully recovered. We as a society have not finished processing the trauma of directly or indirectly witnessing illness and death on such a large scale, and the memory of lockdown is still fresh in many people's minds.

The social unrest in *Hamlet*'s Denmark is directly compared to a disease in the play's opening scene: Horatio describes a similar conflict in ancient Rome in which "the

²³⁶ "Hamnet Shakespeare: what happened to William Shakespeare's only son?" *Shakespeare Birthplace Trust*, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, accessed 2 March 2025, <https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/shakespedia/william-shakespeare/william-shakespeares-family/hamnet-shakespeare>

moist star [...] was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse”,²³⁷ presenting an omen of difficult times to come. (This comparison between disease, unusual or unexplained occurrences, and social unrest is a recurring theme in Shakespeare’s writing, comparable to the descriptions of war-torn Scotland in Act II, scene iv of *Macbeth*.) The idea of disease as metaphor for social disorder is also present in one of the play’s most well-known lines: Marcellus’s observation in Act I, scene iv that “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark”.²³⁸ The line brings to mind decay and death, similar to the extremely graphic descriptions of plague deaths that were very prevalent in writings at the time. The “rot” in Denmark has the potential to spread and cause disaster, much like a contagious disease or infection. *Hamlet* suggests that disorder and chaos, whether in the form of a literal illness or a figurative one, will continue to spread until it has either killed its host(s) or been eradicated by some sort of outside force.

J.F. Bernard also observes in their chapter “Hamlet’s Stories/Stories of Hamlet: Shakespeare’s Theatre, the Plague, and Contagious Storytelling” that Hamlet is the sole carrier of his father’s memory and therefore “patient zero” for the events that unfold in the play: by seeing his father’s ghost and learning the truth about the nature of his death, Hamlet has the ability to “infect” others with this knowledge, much like a disease can spread from person to person.²³⁹ Bernard compares this knowledge to a disease, or “something *inside* of him, which people cannot see and which he refuses to divulge [...] something invisible deep inside Hamlet which could potentially break out, an image not altogether different from Fracastoro’s seed-carrying model”.²⁴⁰ Bernard also classifies Hamlet as a “viral” play in the sense that it is very well-known in Western and English-speaking culture, and so it is a common source of derivative works and internet memes. The story has, in a sense, “gone viral” over the course of the four-plus centuries since it was first performed, in the form of countless interpretations and works inspired by the play. According to Bernard, stories themselves are viral in nature, and *Hamlet* exemplifies this idea—not just by its impact on popular culture, but also in the story itself. Bernard argues that Bernardo’s line in Act I, scene i (“Sit down awhile, / And let us once

²³⁷ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet (The Second Quarto, 1694-05, Arden Shakespeare Third Series)*, eds. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (Bloomsbury, 2006), I.i.119-121.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, I.iv.90.

²³⁹ J.F. Bernard, “Hamlet’s Story/Stories of Hamlet: Shakespeare’s Theater, the Plague, and Contagious Storytelling”, in *Contagion and the Shakespearean Stage*, eds. Darryl Chalk and Mary Floyd-Wilson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 222.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 221.

again assail your ears / That are so fortified against our story / With what we have two nights seen”²⁴¹) “hints at the inherent power of stories to infiltrate its listeners”²⁴² and “presents narratives as a disease which, through repeated dissemination, overtakes the senses”.²⁴³ *Hamlet*’s narrative suggests that stories, like diseases, have the ability to impact those they encounter whether they want to be impacted or not, and those “infected” with knowledge are compelled to spread it to others. There is, according to Bernard, “a need to *share* whatever is rotten in Denmark with those who will listen”.²⁴⁴

The presence of the ghost in *Hamlet* also makes it a fitting example for this case study, given the fact that the “ghosts” of the productions discussed here are what remain accessible to present-day audiences. The appearance of Old Hamlet’s ghost is what initially allows Hamlet to learn the truth about his father’s death, allowing the events of the play to unfold—without this view into his father’s past, Hamlet would not have had the knowledge he needed to enact revenge on his father’s behalf. Hamlet himself expresses this sentiment in Act I, scene v: “Yea, from the table of my memory / I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records [...] And thy commandment all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain, / Unmix’d with baser matter”.²⁴⁵ In this line, Hamlet acknowledges the importance of this record of the past that has been relayed to him, and that he must use this knowledge to take control of his future. By viewing the recordings of the plays discussed in this chapter—especially alongside the remaining evidence of the initial audience’s participation and interaction in social media spaces—current audiences can learn about the past and draw inspiration for future productions via the “ghosts” of the original performance events. Just as the ghost of Hamlet’s father speaks to him in the play, the original audiences of the works discussed in this chapter are able to “speak” to contemporary viewers via the traces and digital footprints they leave on the versions of the productions that exist today.

III. YouTube and Virtual Ghosts

The use of virtual performance platforms such as YouTube in online productions during COVID-19 not only allowed anyone with an internet connection to access these performances during their initial premieres, but also allows for access to an extensive

²⁴¹ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.i.36-39.

²⁴² Bernard, “Hamlet’s Story / Stories of *Hamlet*”, 220.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 220.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 220.

²⁴⁵ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.v.98-99; 102-104.

catalogue of archival material after the fact. Both Sofa Shakespeare and The Show Must Go Online have kept their videos available on YouTube, allowing audiences to revisit the productions at a later date if they missed the initial viewings or want to rewatch them. Of course, watching the recordings of the productions lacks the collective participation aspect of watching them live (or watching the initial premiere event, in the case of Sofa Shakespeare); however, these recorded productions serve their own purpose within the archive of lockdown-era Shakespearean works: they provide the opportunity for viewers today to not only watch the productions themselves, but also view the “ghosts” of the production’s original audiences—a feature that is unique to YouTube’s live broadcast feature and similar platforms that allow for recordings of audience feedback in real time.

Any work of performance art can of course be documented and archived in some capacity: for example, via written accounts, photography, or video and audio recordings. In-person performances of theatrical productions are frequently filmed for the express purpose of allowing audiences to watch them later on, either in their homes or in a dedicated venue such as a movie theatre. During lockdown, many theatre companies released recordings of pre-COVID productions for viewers to watch on their personal devices, for free or for a small charge (for example, the National Theatre at Home initiative, in which the National Theatre temporarily allowed viewers to watch a small selection of past productions without having to pay the platform’s usual subscription fee). Projects such as The Show Must Go Online and Sofa Shakespeare, however, never had an in-person equivalent—they always existed in the virtual space, so the archival recordings exist on the same platform in which the productions originated. Valerie Clayman Pye describes this contrast in her essay “Performance Review of Zoom Shakespeare: The Show Must Go Online and ‘Read for the Globe’” as follows: “These [pre-recorded] productions [...] were archival performances of works that were produced for live theatre. With The Show Must Go Online, Rob Myles set the virtual stage for artists to consider how they might use the soon to be ubiquitous platform Zoom to create performance that would not have been possible without it”.²⁴⁶ The pre-recorded productions that aired in the early days of lockdown were live performances originally meant to be viewed live, whereas these new productions simultaneously became archival works as they were being

²⁴⁶ Valerie Clayman Pye, “Performance Review of Zoom Shakespeare: *The Show Must Go Online* and ‘Read for the Globe’,” *PARTake: The Journal of Performance as Research* 3, no. 2 (2021): n.p. <https://partakejournal.org/index.php/partake/article/view/549/847>

created: their format didn't just lend itself to recording and archival preservation; it was inherent *to* the format.

The act of documenting performance—and specifically, the question of whether performance can be effectively and meaningfully documented at all—is an issue that has caused controversy among performance scholars. Peggy Phelan argues in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* that the act of documentation itself is at odds with the definition of performance, stating that “Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance”.²⁴⁷ By Phelan’s logic, then, these broadcasts and their archival counterparts are not truly performative, since the act of documentation is inherent to the format in which they were produced. (It is also worth noting that *Unmarked* was first published in 1996, when the internet as we know it today was still in its infancy: most home computers lacked the bandwidth and processing power to support live video streaming, and online video streaming projects on the scale of the works discussed in this thesis were essentially non-existent.) Toni Sant disputes this viewpoint in the introduction to *Documenting Performance*, arguing that “the point that has very frequently been overlooked is that although a recording or document is indeed ‘something other than [the] performance’ it has a value in its own right”²⁴⁸ and that through the act of documentation, “artists acquire a different perspective on their own work, audiences can recall specific images and sounds for works they have witnessed in person, and others who did not see the original work can trace memories of particular events, constructing their own viewpoint on them or using them to gain an understanding of something that would otherwise remain unknown to them and their peers”.²⁴⁹ Sant acknowledges that the documentation of the performance exists as a separate entity from the performance itself, but, when executed correctly, can enhance a performer or viewer’s experience of the original performance rather than attempt to replace it with a low-effort copy. This is arguably even more true now than it was at the time of Phelan’s initial publication, since advancements in technology have allowed for new forms of digital media that are far more accessible and interactive than what was broadly available thirty years ago. The works in this chapter do

²⁴⁷ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Routledge, 1996), 145.

²⁴⁸ Toni Sant, introduction to *Documenting Performance: The Context and Processes of Digital Curation and Archiving*, ed. Toni Sant (Bloomsbury, 2017), 4.

²⁴⁹ Sant, *Documenting Performance*, 6

not have an in-person equivalent, but Sant's argument still applies: watching these performances in their archival form allows viewers to experience the production in ways that are at times distinct from the original broadcast, but not in a way that lessens the experiences of those who did watch the initial streams. Additionally, I argue that the virtual format of these productions makes them uniquely effective as archival works, because little to no effort is needed to transition the works into the archival space.

When considering *The Show Must Go Online*'s catalogue of archives, the videos themselves are only one component of the available material. Because the productions were streamed to YouTube, viewers watching the videos after the initial streams can also access comments from the productions' original audiences via the "live chat" feature that appears to the right of the video feed. The comments appear at the corresponding times that they appeared in the original stream relative to the videos' timestamps, allowing later audiences to watch original audience members' reactions in real time. (The account that uploads the video has the option to turn the chat replay off, but at the time of writing, all of *The Show Must Go Online*'s videos still show the original comments, with the exception of comments posted from accounts that have since been deleted.) This might include typed-out laughter or applause at particularly funny or well-acted scenes (the "clapping hands" emoji was a common way to indicate applause), individual compliments to specific actors, callbacks to jokes from previous shows, or observations about stylistic choices or particularly powerful story moments. At the end of the show, audience members were invited to use the chat box to ask questions for the cast and crew, some of which would be selected for a brief post-show Q&A period with the full cast and crew—another indicator of which characters, moments, or artistic decisions may have resonated the most with the audience.

Hamlet has proven to be a particularly popular choice for lockdown-era theatrical productions, both in terms of new works produced during this period (as with *The Show Must Go Online*), and newly-released recordings of past performances of the play that took place before lockdown. Pascale Aebischer documents this phenomenon in her book *Viral Shakespeare*, in which she describes her experience of watching ten different online versions of the play in April and May 2020, a process she refers to as "binge watching *Hamlet*".²⁵⁰ Aebischer suggests that *Hamlet*'s popularity during this time may be at least

²⁵⁰ Pascale Aebischer, *Viral Shakespeare: Performance in the Time of Pandemic* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 14.

in part due to the fact that it is “the only one of Shakespeare’s tragedies to take place in a sort of lockdown, as Hamlet is trapped in Elsinore, unable to return to the freedom of his student life in Wittenburg”.²⁵¹ Bernard compares *Hamlet*’s popularity in online spaces to the transmission and spread of a contagious disease, arguing that “Hamlet on the Internet perfects the contagion process, finally achieving the plague’s capacity for ‘flawless communicability’”.²⁵² Much like Aebischer, Bernard also describes *Hamlet* as a “viral” play, pointing to the play’s ubiquity in online spaces, giving it a “digital afterlife”²⁵³ in which the play takes on new modernised forms and formats while still continuing to disseminate the play’s original narrative and themes.

Although the works discussed in this chapter demonstrate YouTube’s ability to preserve not only the works themselves, but also (to an extent) the reactions to and engagement with the work, it is worth noting that YouTube is far from being an ideal platform for media preservation or engagement with said media in the months and years following its initial release. Christy Desmet discusses some of these issues in an article for *Borrowers and Lenders* titled “The Art of Curation: Searching for Global Shakespeares in the Digital Archives.” Desmet acknowledges that YouTube’s relative ease of use when uploading material allows for the potential for an enormously extensive library of work, but argues that its lack of any formalised curation process (aside from its own algorithm and moderation team) presents potential issues when accessing those materials—not just in terms of the overall quality of available content (which is of course subjective), but also in terms of which content users may consciously or unconsciously gravitate towards. Because YouTube’s algorithm privileges certain works over others in terms of appearances in search results or suggested videos, this can reinforce existing disparities in what kinds of works receive the most engagement. At the time of the article’s publication in 2017, for example, nearly all of the initial search results that appeared when searching for “Romeo and Juliet” were from Western, English-speaking creators, with the first video in a language other than English appearing on the third page of results, and the first video in a non-Western language (in this case, Korean) appearing on page seven.²⁵⁴ I attempted a similar search in 2025 (using the term “Romeo and Juliet play” to minimise results that were only tangentially related to Shakespeare), and found

²⁵¹ Aebischer 2021, 12.

²⁵² J.F. Bernard, “Hamlet’s Story / Stories of Hamlet”, 226.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 226.

²⁵⁴ Christy Desmet, “The Art of Curation: Searching for Global Shakespeares in the Digital Archives,” *Borrowers and Lenders* 11, no. 1 (2017), 11.

that none of the first twenty results appear to feature works from non-Western companies. (Because YouTube's search feature now uses an endless scroll model instead of individual pages, I was unable to make an exact comparison to Desmet's findings.) Because YouTube's algorithm tends to privilege videos that are already receiving significant engagement, and bases its individualised recommendations to users on what the user has already watched, it can reinforce existing gaps in a viewer's knowledge or biases toward a certain type of content. This creates a feedback loop that may improve a viewer's knowledge of a topic they're already interested in, but doesn't lend itself well to the introduction of new and unfamiliar ideas. A user looking for videos of Shakespeare's works would likely receive a very Western-centric collection of results unless they were actively looking for a more diverse selection. As Desmet points out, "surfing [on YouTube] is more natural than attending closely to the videos" and "YouTube might be said to be governed [...] by an economics of 'inattention'"²⁵⁵—and this passive style of engagement makes it an arguably less-than-ideal platform for challenging users' assumptions and expectations about Shakespeare's works and who performs them.

Another complication with the use of YouTube as an archival space is the fact that any material posted to the website can be removed at any time, by either the account holder or YouTube's moderators. While neither *Sofa Shakespeare's* or *The Show Must Go Online's* creators have not, at the time of writing, expressed any intent to remove the videos from YouTube (in fact, *The Show Must Go Online's* slogan of "Shakespeare for everyone, for free, forever" implies that they plan to keep the videos accessible for the foreseeable future), those intentions can only remain true at the discretion of YouTube and its continued existence and maintenance of its current policies. For example, should YouTube make changes to their existing rules in a way that would place any of the productions in violation (or correctly or incorrectly identify an existing violation in a video), the video could be removed with little opportunity for recourse on the account holder's end. There's also, of course, the possibility that YouTube as a platform could cease to exist at any point in time, or change substantially in a way that makes it less appealing or useful to its current userbase (similar to Twitter's rebranding into X in 2023). In that event, the account holders could repost the videos on a different platform, assuming that they have retained the original files—but that would have to happen at their discretion, and any evidence of engagement with the video such as view counts, likes and

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

dislikes, comments, and chat messages would presumably be lost. (Additionally, given the fact that YouTube allows for unlimited uploads at no cost to the user, many users may choose to use it *as* their storage backup.) Ayanna Thompson asks in her aforementioned article from 2010, “How can we use, research, and write about materials that may not be accessible to others in the future?”²⁵⁶ Although the “virtual ghosts” of these productions currently serve as a tremendously valuable resource for both casual viewers and scholars of virtual Shakespeare, and will continue to do so for as long as they remain available online, their continued existence is never a guarantee.

As previous chapters have discussed, both *Sofa Shakespeare* and *The Show Must Go Online* were deliberate in their efforts to encourage global participation and challenge existing stereotypes about what Shakespeare can be and who can or should perform it. However, the aforementioned issues with YouTube’s search feature and algorithm could potentially limit the scope of their reach. Both projects were advertised on social media such as Facebook and Twitter, so presumably not all viewers found the projects through YouTube’s algorithm-generated suggestions, but a person casually browsing YouTube is unlikely to organically come across a video from one of these projects. Additionally, since YouTube’s algorithm prioritises videos that are already receiving engagement, even dedicated viewers of these projects may have to actively seek out the projects’ less popular videos. For instance, when I went to the page for *Sofa Shakespeare*’s *Romeo and Juliet*, the next *Sofa Shakespeare* video that YouTube recommended I watch was the project’s version of *Hamlet*: already one of their more popular videos, and one I had already watched multiple times while researching for this chapter.

IV. Live Chat as a Community Builder and Archival Tool

Even outside of their production of *Hamlet*, the live chat feature was consistently a hallmark of *The Show Must Go Online*’s productions, with the audience members referred to as “Digital Groundlings” (a reference to Shakespeare’s earliest audiences and “the unruly sense of the yard at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre”,²⁵⁷ as Gemma Kate Allred describes it in her chapter “Notions of Liveness in Lockdown Performance”). Myles,

²⁵⁶ Thompson, “Unmooring the Moor”, 355.

²⁵⁷ Gemma Kate Allred, “Notions of Liveness in Lockdown Performance,” in *Lockdown Shakespeare*, eds. Gemma Kate Allred, Benjamin Broadribb, and Erin Sullivan (Bloomsbury, 2021), 73.

along with Valerie Clayman Pye, describe the Groundlings as follows in *Innovation and Digital Theatremaking*:

Like the groundlings of Shakespeare's theatre are thought to be, they were rowdy, rambunctious, there for a good time, and not above wandering concentration. Within this microcosm, a culture naturally formed that allowed people to find a sense of immediate community and feel a sense of being part of an audience, rather than a lone auditor in their homes.²⁵⁸

Audience members were encouraged to comment on the show, and frequently complimented actors' performances or left emojis of clapping hands to represent applause. Returning "groundlings" developed their own in-jokes over time: according to The Show Must Go Online actor and audience member Dominic Brewer as quoted in Allred's article, "From week one, anytime someone was wearing a hat someone in the chat would shout (in capitals, type) 'HAT'. Anytime there was a dog, everyone would shout 'DOG'. From *Henry V Part 1* onwards, 'SAUCY PRIEST' became a regular. How many saucy priests are in Shakespeare? Lots, it turns out!"²⁵⁹ Watching multiple The Show Must Go Online performances in succession reveals that the same audience members often returned for multiple shows, contributing to a growing sense of community and camaraderie over the course of the project's run.

In a sense, the "digital groundlings" are reminiscent of an in-person theatre audience—they certainly contribute towards the sense of togetherness and collective experience that typically tends to be more closely associated with in-person productions. However, these online commentary spaces afford the audience a privilege that they don't normally have according to contemporary theatre etiquette standards: the ability to directly comment on the performance, in real time, in a space that the actors and other audience members can see. Pye states that this dynamic "create[s] amongst [the audience] a shared experience that could not exist in a quiet theatre, where codes of behavior would prohibit the simultaneous engagement of both the play and the communal theatre-going experience".²⁶⁰ This type of direct engagement with the actors and with one another is

²⁵⁸ Robert Myles and Valerie Clayman Pye, *Innovation and Digital Theatremaking: Rethinking Theatre with The Show Must Go Online* (Routledge, 2024), 53.

²⁵⁹ Dominic Brewer, quoted in Allred, "Notions of Liveness in Lockdown Performance", 73.

²⁶⁰ Pye, "Performance Review of Zoom Shakespeare", n.p.

distinct from that of most in-person theatre, and is one of the ways in which *The Show Must Go Online* was especially effective at cultivating online community during this time.

Beyond the community-building aspect of the live chat that was present during *The Show Must Go Online*'s initial streams, the chat messages play a crucial role in the productions' efficacy within the digital archive. Not only are the productions themselves preserved on the same platform on which they originally appeared (an affordance that is of course not possible with filmed in-person theatre), but so too are the audience's reactions (or, at least, the reactions that they felt compelled to share in writing at the time). Therefore, viewers watching the recorded streams can not only watch the production, but also experience the audience's feedback as it was happening. Though it is of course no longer possible to participate in these conversations (the chat closes at the conclusion of the livestream, so later viewers can only leave comments using YouTube's regular commenting system), it does give viewers the opportunity to observe these conversations and get a sense of the audience's overall mood and tone during the livestream. According to Allred, "those responses exist as snapshots of moments in time throughout the year. In the chat, groundlings reference their everyday lives, weather conditions and changes to lockdown. Recommendations for other performances sit alongside immediate reaction to the current live *TSMGO* production and anticipation for forthcoming productions".²⁶¹ The chat messages provide a glimpse into that specific moment in lockdown, contextualising the production within the larger community that surrounded it, as well as the historical moment as a whole.

The live chat for *The Show Must Go Online*'s *Hamlet* represents the overall dynamics of the live chat particularly well: the audience's apparent familiarity with the play inspired more opportunities for jokes and banter, and the show premiered around five months into the project's run—meaning that many of the "groundlings" had gotten to know one another and built a rapport by this point. (Particularly toward the beginning of the recording, audience members can frequently be seen greeting one another and expressing delight over seeing a familiar name appear in the comments.) Kristin Atherton's portrayal of *Hamlet* garnered frequent praise from audience members, especially in familiar scenes such as the "To be or not to be" speech.²⁶² The audience's

²⁶¹ Allred, "Notions of Liveness in Lockdown Performance", 77.

²⁶² Rob Myles, *The Show Must Go Online: Hamlet*, YouTube, 12 August 2020, https://www.youtube.com/live/QIDkPcYdSG0?si=g_YT5HhitMH04tIa, 1:34:50.

engagement with and enjoyment of the production is apparent from reading the chat messages. Myles and Pye describe the overall mood of the live chat to be “rowdy, rambunctious, there for a good time, and not above wandering concentration”,²⁶³ a sentiment that is reflected in *Hamlet*’s live chat - although the audience’s collective attitude of lighthearted playfulness comes alongside a sentiment of seemingly genuine appreciation for the work. Throughout the show, the inside jokes and friendly banter are punctuated with compliments toward the actors’ line deliveries or costume choices, or sometimes just a series of “clapping hands” emojis to indicate applause for a particularly impressive performance. The Show Must Go Online’s live chat functioned as a space for people to interact with each other and with the work, in an atmosphere not entirely unlike that of a theatre lobby after a particularly well-received performance.

V. Preserving Audience Connection Through Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

The Show Must Go Online’s *Hamlet* utilised the chat feature in a way that is distinct from that of the project’s other productions, by having characters from the play—specifically Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—participate in the chat in character to interact with the audience. At the time of writing, these comments no longer show up in the recorded version of the production under the name “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern” – instead, they appear under the name of The Show Must Go Online’s Associate Producer, Matthew Rhodes. (Presumably, Rhodes temporarily changed the name on his account for the purposes of this scene, and then changed it back after the production’s conclusion. YouTube displays whatever name is currently affiliated with the account, regardless of what name was displayed at the time the comments were posted, which sometimes results in disparities such as this one.) Rhodes is quoted describing the live chat in Allred’s article saying that “We [i.e. the production team] used it like walking into the house [of a theatre auditorium]”:²⁶⁴ the chat messages were meant to give the impression that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were intermingling with the audience. To a viewer unfamiliar with The Show Must Go Online’s production team or the production’s internal processes, Rhodes’s comments in the live chat do not particularly stand out amongst the other comments from audience members—the comments from “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern” match the overall tone of the ongoing conversation, firmly positioning the

²⁶³ Myles and Pye, *Innovation and Digital Theatremaking*, 53.

²⁶⁴ Matthew Rhodes, quoted in Allred, “Notions of Liveness in Lockdown Performance”, 76.

characters alongside the rest of the “digital groundlings.” However, the responses from the audience (many of which tag the account in question) clearly demonstrate the audience’s enthusiasm for this concept. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern only appear in the chat for a few minutes during the play-within-a-play, but even after they stop posting messages, other viewers repeatedly tag them encouraging them to return. (One viewer even remarks on Guildenstern’s large hat in one scene, facetiously complaining that it’s blocking their view of the stage. Although meant as a joke, this speaks to the overall sentiment that Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the rest of the audience feel as though they’re occupying the same physical space, despite being physically apart.)

To a viewer watching the play after the fact, this simultaneous absence and presence of the two characters in the live chat gives them a somewhat ghostlike presence in the production’s archival form. The proof of their presence is there, as evidenced by the responses to their comments, but they themselves (or at least their names) have disappeared. Although other audience members frequently address them directly, it is not apparent to the viewer which replies are from them, and the tone of their messages seems to blend in alongside the other messages—a choice that might have helped them solidify their position within the audience when the names “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern” were displayed next to their messages, but makes it difficult to parse now that their names are no longer immediately recognisable. To a viewer watching post-lockdown, the (probably unintentional) effect is that the audience members are addressing characters who aren’t actually there—or talking to a “ghost” that is visible to them but not to the viewer. Once again, this places them both within the world outside the play as well as separate from it. (As a side note, the popularity of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s live commentary does make the chat a bit more difficult for present-day viewers to read: the flurry of comments that appear after Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s appearance make the conversations in these moments more difficult to follow without pausing the video frequently, since there are so many comments posted in rapid succession.)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s transitions between the world of the play and the world of the audience bring to mind (perhaps unintentionally) Tom Stoppard’s absurdist play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967), in which the two characters are primarily depicted outside the narrative of the play, observing the actions of the other characters with little to no control over their own ultimate fates. Guildenstern observes in

the play's second act that "There's a logic at work – it's all done for you, don't worry",²⁶⁵ referring to the events of the play that, from their perspectives outside the context of the main story, appear random and beyond their control. The two are characters in Hamlet's story, but in Stoppard's play they are also spectators to the action, drawn into the story at times (with occasional snippets of text from the original *Hamlet*), but with little impact on their outcome. Although the play does not feature direct audience interaction as is the case with *The Show Must Go Online*'s depiction of the two characters, the play is often staged with, as David Bevington describes it in his book *Murder Most Foul: Hamlet Through the Ages*, an "intensely metatheatrical awareness of its taking place in the theatre"²⁶⁶ – an implicit acknowledgement of the audience's presence, albeit not one that addresses them directly. Both the audience and the two characters are observers to the action that takes place in Shakespeare's version of events.

Similarly, by appearing in the live chat in *The Show Must Go Online*'s version of the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern position themselves as spectators of the production as well as participants in it: they show up onscreen alongside the other performers, but also alongside the audience in the chat. In this sense, they exist in two worlds at once, bridging the gap between the world of the play and the world of the socially-isolated audience. Their appearance as audience members during the dumbshow (which is also when their interactions in the chat took place) serves a dual purpose by positioning them as spectators both in the world of the play and outside it, which in turn allows the audience to communicate directly with the characters in the play rather than just one another. In the show's archival form, this presents a snapshot into some of the actor/audience member dynamics that took place during the production, in a manner that would be difficult or impossible with a recording of a production with an in-person audience.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's appearance in *The Show Must Go Online*'s *Hamlet* is also distinct from that of the other characters by virtue of the fact that they appear in the same Zoom window, unlike the rest of the characters who appear in separate windows (not just in *Hamlet*, but in *The Show Must Go Online*'s other productions as well). In most cases, this is done out of necessity: most actors were working out of their own homes, so in-person collaboration was not possible. Additionally, all actors were

²⁶⁵ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (Grove Press, 1967), 40.

²⁶⁶ David Bevington, *Murder Most Foul: Hamlet Through the Ages* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 194.

asked to change their display name on Zoom to their character's name followed by their own name, so the separate windows helped to clarify which actor was playing which character—so even if two or more actors were in the same physical space at the time of recording, using separate Zoom windows was in keeping with the project's overall norms and creative practice. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, however, do not follow this template: Capaldi and Grace appear alongside each other, with their Zoom window labelled as “Rosencrantz & Guildenstern.” The actors clarified in the post-show Q&A session that, although they have appeared together in other *The Show Must Go Online* productions, they had previously performed from separate rooms and on separate devices, so their characters did not appear to be physically next to one another. This suggests that the appearance in the same Zoom window was indeed a deliberate creative choice, rather than a matter of convenience brought on by both actors presumably living in the same household.



Image description: A screenshot from Act III, scene ii of *The Show Must Go Online's Hamlet*. Top row left to right: Ophelia (Tanvi Virmani), Hamlet (Kristin Atherton), Claudius (Emily Carding). Middle row left to right: Polonius (Michael Bertenshaw), Gertrude (Seeta Indrani), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Robbie Capaldi and Maryam Grace). Bottom row: Horatio (Emilio Vieira). (Source: Rob Myles, *The Show Must Go Online: Hamlet*, YouTube, 12 August 2020, https://www.youtube.com/live/QIDkPcYdSG0?si=g_YT5HhitMH04tIa, 1:51:00.)

This choice highlights the interchangeability of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as characters: for viewers unfamiliar with the play's script, it is not immediately obvious which character is which. (Incidentally, this interchangeability is also referenced in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*: when Claudius and Gertrude meet the two characters, they appear confused about which one is which.²⁶⁷) They appear on the virtual "stage" as a unit, and one is never seen without the other. They do not need to rely on visual effects in order to appear physically close, unlike other characters in the play. (These visual effects are achieved by, among other things: strategic placement of Zoom windows, matching backdrops and lighting, or arrangement of furniture within each window.) Their physical proximity affords them the ability to make direct eye contact with one another without having to look into the camera, which allows them to address one another directly or play off of one another for comedic reactions without a virtual barrier mediating their connection. In this way, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear more closely interlinked with one another than they do with the other characters in the play, and, conversely, the other characters in the play appear more isolated in comparison.

This contrast between isolation and connection further highlights the context in which *The Show Must Go Online* was initially performed. In *The Show Must Go Online*'s marketing and social media presence, there is significant emphasis on the fact that the play was produced entirely in lockdown, with the actors working in isolation. Seeing these actors appear onscreen together, clearly in the same physical space as well as in the same Zoom window, places them in contrast with the rest of the cast, who appear to be fully physically isolated from their castmates. This once again places Rosencrantz and Guildenstern simultaneously inside and outside the world of the play, by breaking the established rules of the production—not just in *Hamlet*, but in *The Show Must Go Online*'s catalogue as a whole. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exist in a world where physical proximity and connection are possible, and people do not have to rely on digital technologies to facilitate interpersonal connection. From an archival perspective, this highlights the historical context in which the show was conceptualised and performed, and allows viewers to correlate the production with a particular moment in time.

²⁶⁷ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, 34-36.

The portrayal of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *The Show Must Go Online's Hamlet* calls attention to both the isolating circumstances in which the production was initially performed, and the connections it facilitated between actors and audience members. By positioning these two characters simultaneously inside and outside the world of the play, the audience is invited to engage more closely with the world of the play and position themselves alongside the characters. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *The Show Must Go Online's Hamlet* serve as a bridge between the isolation of lockdown and the interpersonal connection afforded by the online communities that arose during this period.

It is worth noting, however, that direct engagement between actors and audience members in the virtual space is not always as near-universally well-received as it was in this case. Big Telly's virtual *Macbeth* (discussed further in Chapter 3) had several scenes in which certain audience members were invited (or encouraged) to turn on their cameras and appear as background characters in the scene. Some participant-viewers purportedly enjoyed this feature: Thomas Cartelli states that "auditors fully enjoyed the opportunity to be spotlighted"²⁶⁸ when invited to appear as happy onlookers at Macbeth's coronation. However, Aebischer (who appeared during the banquet scene in the same play) had a much less positive experience, which she describes as follows:

[M]y excitement at being selected quickly gave way to profound awkwardness and a peculiar sensation of disembodiment. I had trouble mapping my own body onto the diminutive on-screen version and was viscerally disgusted by the weirdness of my size in relation to the height of the table and "chair" I was sitting on. [...] Being 'included' and watching myself as a badly performing actor made me acutely aware of the identity theft the production was performing by inserting me in it in this manner against my will.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁸ Thomas Cartelli, "Medium specificity, medium convergence and aliveness in the chromakey (2018) and Big Telly Zoom (2020) *Macbeths*", in *Early Modern Liveness: Mediating Presence in Text, Stage and Screen*, ed. Danielle Rosvally and Donovan Sherman (Bloomsbury, 2023), 79.

²⁶⁹ Aebischer, *Viral Shakespeare*, 79.

For Aebischer, this form of audience participation was an invasion of privacy and viewer autonomy rather than an exciting opportunity to engage even more directly with the work. (Aebischer does acknowledge that she of course could have withdrawn her consent to participate at any point by turning off her camera; however, to do so while in the middle of the scene would have also felt awkward and embarrassing in its own way.²⁷⁰) Even Cartelli characterises this feature as a “breached privacy of [the viewers’] home-viewing spaces”,²⁷¹ although he does not express the same negative associations with this breach that Aebischer does. The style of text-based direct audience engagement in *The Show Must Go Online*, which does not require video participation and does not place as much pressure on the audience to participate (or not) has proven to be a much less invasive alternative to having the audience appear onscreen. Rather than bring the audience members into the play, *The Show Must Go Online*’s *Hamlet* brings the world of the play into the audience.

VI. *Sofa Shakespeare’s Hamlet and the Digital Archive*

Sofa Shakespeare’s Hamlet was the final instalment in the series before its indefinite hiatus began in March of 2021. Unlike *The Show Must Go Online*, which determined the running order of shows based on the order in which the plays were believed to have been written, *Sofa Shakespeare* did not have a predetermined order of plays—nor did the project cover the entirety of Shakespeare’s known dramatic works, as with *The Show Must Go Online*. Thus, ending the project’s run with one of Shakespeare’s best known and most iconic plays was a deliberate choice rather than coincidental timing.

Emma Smith characterises *Hamlet* as being a play that deals with the past rather than the future. The murder of Hamlet’s father, which on its surface sounds like it should be one of the most dramatic moments in the play, has already happened when the action of the play begins. The appearance of Old Hamlet’s ghost is a testament to this, with Smith noting that “The ghost’s repeated encouragement to ‘Remember me’ (1.5.91) is a command for his son to join him in the past”.²⁷² Smith suggests that this could be an allusion to the political uncertainty in England towards the end of the Elizabethan period,

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁷¹ Cartelli, “Medium specificity, medium convergence and aliveness in the chromakey (2018) and Big Telly Zoom (2020) *Macbeths*”, 79.

²⁷² Emma Smith, *This is Shakespeare: How to Read the World’s Greatest Playwright* (Penguin Random House, 2019), 165.

and that “to dare to think forwards, to a time post-Elizabeth, was a crime”.²⁷³ Similarly, “to dare to think forwards” was an emotionally-charged topic in the era of COVID-19 – perhaps not a crime as Smith characterises it, but an action that became increasingly difficult as the pandemic raged on, with lockdowns repeatedly being extended and little certainty about when or if things would ever return to the way they were before. Looking backward to a time that is now impossible to return to is an idea that would have resonated with late Elizabethan audiences as well as audiences in 2020 and 2021, and makes *Hamlet* a fitting play to perform during this time. Additionally, Sofa Shakespeare and The Show Must Go Online’s versions of the play are works that continue to exist in the virtual memory – they themselves are works we can look back on as we remember this time post-lockdown.

It is fitting, then, that Sofa Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was the project’s final production, premiering in March of 2021. Although lockdown was still far from over in most parts of the world where it was enforced, and the threat of the disease still remained ever-present, a potential path forward was beginning to emerge. In Giolzetti’s home state of California, the vaccine rollout was well underway, with immunocompromised people, senior citizens, and people working in certain professions already eligible to receive the vaccine. (As a teacher and California resident myself at the time, I received my second dose of the vaccine the same week that Sofa Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* premiered.) The performance marked the end of an era– in a sense, it was a retrospective on the year of lockdown that everyone had just endured. The big event had already taken place, and much like in the narrative of *Hamlet*, the question that remained was: “What now?”

Sofa Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* also blurs the divide between actor and audience member, albeit in a different way than with The Show Must Go Online. As the final instalment in the series before it went on indefinite hiatus, participants had had a chance to look back on the project over the course of its run: either watching them live during their premieres, or later on. For many if not most participants, their performance in *Hamlet* was likely not their first exposure to the project. As mentioned in the second chapter, Sofa Shakespeare prioritised their casting decisions based on who had not yet been cast in a Sofa Shakespeare production, so this was likely the first appearance for most cast members; however, the production’s robust social media presence suggests that participants were likely to have had some exposure to the project prior to their

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 169.

participation as an actor. (There is at least one exception to the “one appearance per cast member” guideline: Giolzetti appears in the play’s iconic “To be or not to be” speech as well as in the prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*.)

In contrast with *The Show Must Go Online*’s version of the play, Sofa Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* does not feature a live chat replay. The decision to include or not include a live chat feed is inconsistent throughout the project’s run: the project’s first production, *Romeo and Juliet*, originally had a live chat that is now no longer accessible to viewers, whereas the live chat is still viewable on the project’s rendition of *Twelfth Night*. The project’s Twitter page shows a thread of YouTube links for each individual scene of the play²⁷⁴ on the day of *Hamlet*’s premiere, including an intermission²⁷⁵ (which suggests that the scenes were meant to be watched synchronously with other viewers, with the same timing as an in-person production), so real-time audience engagement with the work could theoretically have happened there—however, most tweets in the thread appear to have received little to no engagement. There are also no comments posted via YouTube’s regular commenting feature. Compared to *The Show Must Go Online*’s *Hamlet*, Sofa Shakespeare’s version shows little evidence of audience engagement. This is not necessarily to say that said engagement did not happen; rather, it is not preserved in the virtual archive in the same manner as with *The Show Must Go Online*. This may be at least in part due to the fact that the project appears to have been losing traction by this point: *Hamlet* only has around 550 views on YouTube at the time of writing, compared to *Romeo and Juliet*’s approximately 2,700 views. (It is worth noting that *The Show Must Go Online* also saw a decline in viewership towards the end of the project’s run, so this issue was by no means unique to Sofa Shakespeare.) In March of 2021, the state of California (where the project originated) was beginning to provide COVID-19 vaccinations to its residents, and although the pandemic was by no means over, the end of lockdown appeared to at least potentially be in sight. In a sense, the lack of visibly archived audience engagement with Sofa Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is indicative of the historical context in its own right: people were beginning to move on after a year of living in lockdown, and were no longer as concerned with finding virtual alternatives to in-

²⁷⁴ Sofa Shakespeare (@sofashakes), “*** FANFARE *** Gather round, children! On the 1 year anniversary of the birth of this global project, we present to you Sofa Shakes’ 13th production, H A M L E T! Starting with...Hamlet: Act I, Scene I”, Twitter, 15th March 2021, <https://twitter.com/sofashakes/status/1371546279185063936>

²⁷⁵ Sofa Shakespeare (@sofashakes), “INTERMISSION! Meme courtesy of Mindy Keenan. *** 400 year old spoiler alert ***”, Twitter, 15th March 2021, <https://twitter.com/sofashakes/status/1371628303010861056>

person engagement. Or, perhaps more cynically, these virtual performance spaces may have begun to lose their appeal and sense of novelty over time.

Despite this apparent lack of engagement (or at least evidence of engagement), Sofa Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is still indicative of its cultural moment, both with regard to the pandemic and to the broader cultural and historical contexts. The majority of clips that make up the production appear to have been filmed in the actors' homes, suggesting that lockdown was still ongoing in many places at the time of filming. Further adding to this sense is the fact that many of the actors appear alone in their clips, often using pets or household objects as stand-ins for other actors—an effect that is humorous at times but is also (perhaps unintentionally) a stark reminder of the isolation that many people were still experiencing at this point in the pandemic. Other pertinent socio-political issues show up in the recording as well: for example, a clip from Act II, scene ii prominently features a photograph of the American politician Bernie Sanders, calling to mind the presidential election that had taken place several months prior. The Black Lives Matter movement is referenced at times as well. Benjamin Broadribb describes the performance of one actor, Dathan B. Williams, as follows: “spoken by an American actor of colour, Williams’ opening line – ‘The pangs of despised love, the laws’ delay’ (3.1.71) – inexorably echoes the injustices that drove the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States and beyond during the height of the pandemic”.²⁷⁶ Sofa Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, when viewed several years after its initial airing, provides a snapshot into the dominant cultural issues of its time period—not just with regard to what was happening in the news, but also in terms of the individual participants' responses to it and their use of Shakespearean performance as an outlet.

The crowdsourced and patchwork nature of Sofa Shakespeare also enhances the ghostlike presence that remains in its archival form. Because the actors, locations, and filming style change on a minute-to-minute basis, there is no consistent Hamlet (or any of the characters), nor is there a consistent setting or tone. Although the story remains consistent, since adherence to the text was one of the few firm requirements for video submissions,²⁷⁷ the interpretation of the story changes rapidly: it may be a comedy one (literal) minute and a tragedy the next, or a scene may begin as a fairly traditional reading

²⁷⁶ Benjamin Broadribb, “Lockdown Shakespeare and the Metamodern Sensibility”, in *Lockdown Shakespeare*, edited by Gemma Kate Allred, Benjamin Broadribb, and Erin Sullivan (Bloomsbury, 2021), 51.

²⁷⁷ “Actor FAQs” *Sofa Shakespeare*, accessed 2 March 2025, sofashakespeare.com/actor-faqs. This web page is no longer available at its original domain, but is still accessible via the Internet Archive.

and end as a puppet show, music video, or animated cartoon. Many participants chose to use nonhuman (or sometimes even completely inanimate) representations of their assigned characters, such as pets or household objects, and this rapid switch between representations suggests a shapeshifting quality usually reserved for portrayals of supernatural beings (as with the witches in *The Show Must Go Online's Macbeth* discussed in a previous chapter). The portrayal of Old Hamlet's ghost, the only supernatural character in the play, is also inconsistent: at the beginning of Act I, scene v, Hamlet is portrayed by a young girl while the ghost is shown as footage of a burning fire with an adult's distorted and disembodied voice reading the lines, but in the next clip the ghost becomes a fully visible man standing in a forest. While this effect may be entirely fitting for a ghost, all of the characters in the play change form in a similar fashion, thus blurring the lines between ghost and human.



Image description: A screenshot from Act I, scene v of Sofa Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

(Source: *Sofa Shakespeare: Hamlet - Act I scene v*, Sofa Shakespeare, Youtube, 15 March 2021, <https://youtu.be/3klJyJPLSUo?si=layCJI-8ONvRjdOg>, 1:39.)

VII. Conclusion

As these two case studies have proven, *Hamlet* is an especially fitting choice for virtual Shakespearean works produced during lockdown, in terms of both its subject matter and its cultural status as (as Aebsicher and Bernard have both described it) a

“viral” work of theatre. Both productions demonstrate the ways in which virtual productions of *Hamlet* can blur the lines between actor and audience member via the use of virtual performance spaces, live chats, and social media posts and conversations. By preserving the virtual “ghosts” of these audience members in the virtual archive, it is possible to preserve a snapshot of the moment in time that the productions first occurred, and allow for present-day audience members to experience not only the recorded livestream itself, but the audience feedback in the live chat and on social media.

Conclusion

I. Pandemics Past and Present

As established in Chapter One of this thesis, the history of Shakespearean performance during mass disease outbreaks does not begin with COVID-19, and in fact dates back hundreds of years to when the plays were originally written. Although the plague never features as a central plot point in Shakespeare's plays, it did have a profound impact on his writing, which gives the plays new relevance when performed in the context of a contemporary pandemic such as COVID-19. The two diseases are of course distinct from one another in terms of both their symptoms and their respective portrayals in popular culture; however, the parallels between the two are evident in the themes and visual language present in *Sofa Shakespeare* and *The Show Must Go Online's* productions.

Despite this historical precedent, Shakespearean works produced during COVID-19 were distinct from their historical counterparts due to the availability of online platforms that could be used to facilitate live real-time performance, direct audience engagement and participation, and online communities that surrounded the work. *Sofa Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* demonstrates the ways in which one of these communities emerged in the earliest days of lockdown, using social media to engage participants around the world and incorporating an eclectic and freeform artistic style that encouraged participation from theatre-makers of all backgrounds.

The Show Must Go Online's Macbeth used its online performance platform not only as a means of cultivating community, but also as a canvas for creating audiovisual effects that enhanced the play's portrayals of political turmoil, social unrest, and the supernatural. Compared to other versions of the play such as Punchdrunk Theatre's *Sleep No More*, Past is Prologue Productions' and Filigree Theatre's *Shakespeare in the Dark: Macbeth*, and the Donmar Warehouse's version of the play, *The Show Must Go Online's* version continues a tradition of using multisensory effects to highlight these plot elements. The fully virtual platform enhances these audiovisual features through the use of camera angles, Zoom window positioning, sound effects, and audio distortion, as well as unintentional technical glitches that, at times, highlight the unsettled and disconcerting mood of the play.

Both projects' respective versions of *Hamlet* used the virtual platform to engage audience members before, during, and after the productions' initial streams, in ways that enhanced the audience's viewing experiences in the moment and also left a mark on the plays' continued online presence after the fact. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's direct audience engagement in *The Show Must Go Online*'s version demonstrated the virtual platform's efficacy at blurring the lines between the real world and the world of the play, and *Sofa Shakespeare*'s casting practices allowed for former audience members to easily become a part of the project, further enmeshing the roles of actor and audience member. When viewing these productions today, the communities surrounding the projects are still evident in their digital footprints, leaving "virtual ghosts" that allow post-lockdown audiences to experience echoes of the performance in its original livestreamed form.

By analysing these productions and positioning them within a historical framework, it is apparent that Shakespearean theatre is an effective tool for facilitating online community amidst mass tragedy, using the online platform to create meaningful and collaborative work even in the absence of in-person contact, and crafting an enduring legacy that utilises modern-day technology while still being grounded in history. The works discussed in this thesis prove the efficacy of Shakespearean theatre to bring people together amidst global crisis and tragedy, and the ways in which the virtual space can be used not as a constraint but as a platform for interpersonal connections that span geographic distances and the restrictions of lockdown. Throughout history, Shakespearean theatre has been an effective conduit for interpersonal connection, and these works only further prove how the plays can allow people to reclaim their narratives during periods of tragedy and inspire new ways of working in lockdown and beyond.

II. The Future

When I began writing this thesis in 2021, lockdown restrictions were still in place in many parts of the world, and had only recently been lifted in others. Both projects discussed in this thesis had concluded less than a year prior, and many theatres were still closed or operating at a reduced capacity. Although a path forward was beginning to emerge, there was much uncertainty about when lockdown would be fully behind us or if the reduction in restrictions would last. Today, around five years on from the initial onset of lockdown, things have almost entirely returned to "normal" and the world has recovered in many ways, although not without having to carry the weight of the immense

trauma and loss that has carried over from this time. While fully-online theatrical productions are not unheard of today, they are back to being a rare novelty rather than the norm. It is now possible to view these projects in retrospect, with a few years of distance between then and now and the benefit of hindsight. The virtual “ghosts” of lockdown-era Shakespearean theatre are present not only in *Hamlet*, or even just in the projects’ respective bodies of work as a whole. They are and will continue to exist as part of the longstanding tradition of Shakespearean performance during mass disease outbreaks, a tradition that has almost definitely not yet reached its conclusion. We are now at a point where we can utilise our existing knowledge that we have gained from these projects as we move into the future - a future that is, as ever, uncertain.

It is not coincidental that Shakespearean theatre is an appropriate choice for performance during mass disease outbreaks - it is the very same context that the plays themselves were written in. Before long, COVID-19 and its ensuing lockdown will - much like the bubonic plague outbreaks - become a relic of the past rather than a recent or ongoing trauma. (Although, crucially, it is worth noting that neither disease has been eradicated and both can still be deadly, especially without treatment.) The COVID-19 lockdowns were the first time in the history of Shakespearean performance during mass disease outbreaks that we had the benefit of the internet to continue to create collaborative theatrical works even when social contact is limited, which means that this is the first time in history that we have access to a digital archive preserving footprint of pandemic-era Shakespearean theatre.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented situation in many ways, it was not the first time that the theatre world has had to adapt to accommodate a mass illness outbreak, and it will almost certainly not be the last. Disease outbreaks have always been an inevitability of the human condition, and - barring any miraculous advances in the medical field - always will be. As Ernest B. Gilman notes in *Plague Writing in Early Modern England*, “the microbes were there before us”²⁷⁸ and “we must acknowledge our citizenship in the microbial community, where, we now realize, we have always lived in an uneasy symbiosis”.²⁷⁹ International conflicts, climate disasters, and other large-scale tragedies are also always a possibility for the future, and while being overly alarmist or pessimistic helps no one, it is important to learn from past events in

²⁷⁸ Ernest B. Gilman, *Plague Writing in Early Modern England*. (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 14.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

order to understand and plan for how we can do better to overcome these kinds of situations going forward. Of course there is no work of theatre, Shakespearean or otherwise, that can single-handedly solve or prevent problems at this scale, but the works discussed in this thesis have proven that they can be effective at helping individuals process and find joy and fulfilment in the midst of bigger problems that cannot be solved without bigger systematic changes. In the aftermath of lockdown, we have been presented with a valuable opportunity to reflect on how we can use what we've learned to prepare for the next worst-case scenario.

Both projects discussed in this thesis have long since concluded - a fact that admittedly makes sense when considering their respective working models. Rob Myles and Valerie Clayman Pye explicitly state in *Innovation and Digital Theatremaking* that “The Show Must Go Online was not a sustainable working model” (emphasis theirs).²⁸⁰ This may seem like a shocking statement in a book meant to advise others who hope to create similar works, but in hindsight, it is a logical conclusion. Neither The Show Must Go Online nor Sofa Shakespeare were projects that lent themselves to long-term sustainability - not because of poor organisation or lack of skill on the part of the creators or participants, but because of the conditions under which they were produced and the realities of working within an imperfect system. Both projects depended on labour that was almost entirely unpaid (with the exception of proceeds from voluntary donations and, in the case of The Show Must Go Online, merchandise sales), and participants often had to take on an enormous volume of work in order to ensure that the shows and rehearsal processes ran smoothly and on schedule. As Myles and Pye note, the amount of money required to pay every actor and crew member even minimum wage would have far exceeded any realistic budget typically available for that sort of project: as they put it, “The Show Must Go Online would never have existed as a strictly professional proposition, because that kind of money does not exist to build a community during a time of crisis, in an ad hoc fashion, simply because it is the right thing to do”.²⁸¹ Given Sofa Shakespeare's even larger volume of participants, it stands to reason that the same would be true if it were treated as a professional project. During a time when unemployment rates were exceptionally high and many people were struggling financially, it is difficult to justify spending money on creative projects that are not strict

²⁸⁰ Rob Myles and Valerie Clayman Pye, *Innovation and Digital Theatremaking: Rethinking Theatre with The Show Must Go Online* (Routledge, 2024), 153.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

necessities - but arguably, it is equally difficult to justify letting the projects run indefinitely on an unpaid basis. (And indeed, both projects had concluded by the time lockdown measures were starting to be lifted on a broad scale and people began returning to the workforce en masse.) My goal here is absolutely not to argue that either of these projects should never have existed in the first place, or that there was anything immoral about how they were produced or run. (In fact, one hundred percent of participants in *The Show Must Go Online*'s post-production survey said that they felt they benefited personally from the experience, and ninety percent of surveyed participants said they benefited professionally²⁸² – statistics that only further demonstrate the project's overwhelmingly positive impact on those who participated.) Rather, it is to examine these projects from all angles and consider how they were impacted by working within the imperfect system we have - or perhaps more importantly, what changes must be made to our current system in order to better facilitate works of this nature going forward. Both projects had the advantage of being created during a time when many artists were stuck at home with more free time than they may have otherwise had, and although this was not a sustainable model due to the financial realities of being unable to work, the projects do demonstrate the potential of what could be possible if people did not have these financial constraints - or, alternatively, if the projects had the ability to pay their participants competitive wages. While it is clear that both projects served a valuable purpose and had a tangible impact on people's ability to connect with others and continue to produce new works of theatre during a time when those things were exceptionally difficult for many, it is also important to consider their long-term sustainability and how future projects may anticipate and address these issues.

Both of these projects demonstrate the importance of treating artistic restrictions (in this case, the need for a fully-online and socially-distanced rehearsal process and performance) as an opportunity for innovation rather than something that is destined to hinder the project. Despite the fact that both projects contained elements of live and in-person theatre, neither one sought to replicate the experience of watching or performing in an in-person production, and I argue that that is a crucial component of their success. Many larger Shakespeare companies like Shakespeare's Globe and the Royal Shakespeare Company began by posting recordings of pre-pandemic productions in the earliest weeks and months of lockdown before pivoting to more experimental works

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 146.

produced fully online.²⁸³ The projects discussed in this thesis, however, had no pre-existing body of their own work to draw from and were instead forced (and perhaps granted the opportunity) to innovate from the beginning. Myles and Pye discuss how a key part of creating *The Show Must Go Online* was pinpointing the areas in which Zoom was a hindrance as well as the areas in which the platform allowed for unique opportunities not always afforded by more traditional stage settings: for instance, Zoom allows for the ability to control the audience's visual focus to a higher degree than would typically be possible with in-person theatre, through the use of camera angles and Zoom's "gallery view" option.²⁸⁴ The same can be said for *Sofa Shakespeare*: it would, of course, not be possible to produce an in-person production of a Shakespeare play with hundreds of actors and a setting and artistic style that changes from minute to minute. Both projects worked within the constraints of lockdown to produce works that would not have had the same impact in a more traditional stage setting.

Virtual performance platforms also increase accessibility to theatre in many ways: for example, they vastly reduce geographical barriers to access, they increase access for those with health conditions that make it difficult or impossible to leave their homes even when not in lockdown, and the reduced production costs usually lower or eliminate ticket costs. That said, this does not mean that there are *no* remaining barriers to access. High-speed internet connectivity is not readily available worldwide, certain disabilities can prevent people from being able to effectively use Zoom and other online platforms, and internet access at home usually isn't free. However, while there is no way to create a production that is equally accessible to every possible viewer, online productions have allowed for an opportunity to reconfigure the norms around who theatre (and Shakespeare specifically) is or should be for. When a theatre company is given the opportunity to *not* have to cater to an audience who is located in a certain area, above a certain income level, or with certain physical abilities, this opens the door to new interpretations, innovations, and voices. (Of course, in order to make these works as inclusive and accessible as possible, this must include those onstage and working behind the scenes as well as those in the audience.) The circumstances in which these projects were created allowed for those kinds of opportunities, which the projects' creators enhanced by encouraging

²⁸³ Rebecca Bushnell, "Liveness in early modern theatre", in *Early Modern Liveness: Mediating Presence in Text, Stage and Screen*, eds. Danielle Rosvally and Donovan Sherman (London, New York, and Dublin: Bloomsbury, 2023), 24.

²⁸⁴ Myles and Pye, *Innovation and Digital Theatremaking*, 123-125.

participation from people all over the world and from a wide variety of backgrounds and experience levels.

On a practical level, the works discussed in this thesis demonstrate new ways of working within a fully-online rehearsal and performance space. Prior to the pandemic, there seemed to be little interest in works produced fully online - even for works that were ultimately meant to be filmed and viewed on a screen with a remote audience, rehearsals were typically conducted in person and with a team of artists who were geographically local to one another. More often than not, virtual theatre productions were streamed recordings of live in-person performances, typically filmed with (and designed for) a live in-person audience, or were at least intended to closely replicate that experience: for example, *National Theatre Live*'s productions that were typically screened in movie theatres, or the release of a recording of the Broadway musical *Hamilton* on the video streaming service Disney Plus (which, despite being released well into lockdown in the summer of 2020, had been filmed a few years prior). Works that were designed specifically for a fully or partially online audience were often experimental and not always entirely well-received, as evidenced by the limited-run hybrid version of *Sleep No More* discussed in Chapter Three. Because lockdown made the prioritisation of an online audience a near-necessity for theatre-makers who hoped to continue working, these projects had to introduce new ways of working and thinking in order to exist in the first place. In-person collaboration was not a widely-available option anymore (and in the rare cases where it was, it was severely restricted), and processes for these online creative processes had to be devised quickly. Although the need for fully-online rehearsal and performance processes isn't as pressing now as it was during lockdown, it is worth considering how these ideas and procedures might have other applications even in the post-lockdown world: for instance, creating projects that retain the same level of international participation as *Sofa Shakespeare* and *The Show Must Go Online*, or for simply reaching people in areas where in-person theatre isn't readily available.

Rob Myles has already begun to find new applications for the processes devised with *The Show Must Go Online*, including the *Shakes Against the Machine* project.²⁸⁵ The project, which was created in collaboration with the Chronic Insanity Theatre Company, was a ten-day series of short videos that were posted to YouTube in the days

²⁸⁵ Rob Myles and Chronic Insanity, *Shakes Against the Machine*, accessed 16 March 2025, <https://chronicinsanity.github.io/ShakesAgainstTheMachine/>

leading up to the UK's General Election on July 4th, 2024. The project's marketing describes it as "political digital protest theatre juxtaposing headlines about the corrupt, capricious and clownish escapades of Britain's ruling class with Shakespeare's direct condemnations of the same".²⁸⁶ The videos featured actors reading speeches from various Shakespearean and other early modern plays, while a slideshow of news headlines relating to a common political issue - and relating to the speech being performed - plays in the background. For instance, Episode Four (dir. Joe Strickland) features various headlines relating to natural disasters brought on by climate change, while actor Doug Deans performs a monologue from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in which Titania describes unusual weather-related events not unlike the ones described in the headlines²⁸⁷:

Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain
As in revenge, have sucked up from the sea
Contagious fogs, which falling in the land
Have every pelting river made so proud
That they have overborne their continents.²⁸⁸

Unlike *The Show Must Go Online*, these videos are created in the style of short-form video content typically seen on TikTok, YouTube Shorts, or Instagram Reels: the longest is around three-and-a-half minutes in length with most closer to two minutes or less, and they are filmed in "portrait" orientation, which suggests that they are meant to be watched on a smartphone screen rather than on a computer or television. Details about the production's rehearsal process are not available to the public, but as with *The Show Must Go Online*, the performances themselves were intended for the online space. While *The Show Must Go Online* displayed clear parallels between Shakespearean themes and modern-day political issues, the parallels here are even more intentionally brought to the forefront, with the speeches chosen specifically to mirror specific political issues or events. With a focus on political action rather than online community or connection, it doesn't seem as though *Shakes Against the Machine* was meant to fulfil exactly the same purpose as *The Show Must Go Online* – but this sort of shift is necessary in an ever-

²⁸⁶ Myles and Chronic Insanity.

²⁸⁷ Chronic Insanity, *Shakes Against the Machine - Episode Four*, YouTube, 27 June 2024.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3BIVWZaU4>

²⁸⁸ William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Arden Shakespeare Second Series*, ed. Harold Brooks (Bloomsbury, 1979), II.i.89-93.

changing world, and the project demonstrates how the ideas developed during lockdown can be repurposed as we move toward the future.

To conclude, the works discussed in this thesis demonstrate not only how the online space can be invaluable in bringing people together during times of crisis, or how Shakespearean tragedy can be an effective conduit for creative works during mass disease outbreaks - although both of those things are true. Most importantly, they demonstrate the ways in which humanity, interpersonal connection, and artistic endeavours have persisted and will continue to persist even in a time of widespread grief and mourning. In the midst of a global tragedy, tragedy on the (virtual) stage is one way that people can use their own creativity to take back control of their narratives in an otherwise uncertain and turbulent time, and the works discussed in this thesis illustrate the many ways in which Shakespearean theatre is well equipped to allow people to persist even amidst mass tragedy. This centuries-long tradition of Shakespearean performance began with the bubonic plague, but will not end with COVID-19. The virtual “ghosts” of the past will be what guides us toward an ever-changing future, and will allow us to look to the past, engage with the present, and move forward into the unknown.

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