

### 10.3 On Shakespeare Abstracts

'Digitising Performance History: Where do we go from here?'

**Christie Carson, Royal Holloway University of London**

This essay will look at the issues at stake in the digital world of archiving performance. The case of Shakespeare presents a particularly extreme example of the power dynamics of this world but as a special case can serve to articulate, in no uncertain terms, what is at stake. The position of Shakespeare within education in the United Kingdom in particular, while a long and well-fought battle, has taken on new dimensions and new champions in the digital world. At one end of the spectrum the current government has seen the history of Shakespeare in performance as a means of fulfilling its mandate to bring history and culture into every classroom in the land. At the other end of the spectrum increasingly large commercial publishers are creating increasingly large and monolithic subscriptions services that are trying to provide a new kind of intellectual authority. Between these two extremes there exists a complex range of individual producers of online materials with a wide range of motivational and methodological positions. The underlying cultural assumptions of the positions I describe are glaring yet few have drawn attention to these aspects of digital archiving. By taking a closer look at who is currently involved in the digital performance archiving world I hope to draw some light towards the issues of power and authority. Performance scholars, I suggest, must become aware of how their work can and will influence the future through providing structured access to the past.

'Explosion of a Memory: Shakespeare at War'

**Alex Karschnia**

Looking back on the 20<sup>th</sup> century we see Shakespeare as contemporary only of those who lived on the other side of the iron curtain. For the East-German playwright Heiner Müller (1929-1995) this was obvious the case, at least when you compared both parts of Germany. The 'German Shakespeare' was a national icon for more than 200 years, especially in 'the biggest GDR in the world'. At the same time it was always dangerous to bring Shakespeare on stage, too easily the presentation of raw power-play was seen as a critique of the ideological battle inside the almighty party. This 'war without battle' was only possible in a society in which money didn't equal power, Müller explained, only in that part world that disappeared from the planet after the fall of the wall on 9<sup>th</sup> of November 1989: the world of real-existing socialism. His work, especially his work on *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* condense the history of the short century between 1917 and 1991. Like Paul Valéry's 'European Hamlet' he sees the old world in a war against itself and its other. The historical caesura of 9/11 has posed the question again: Is Shakespeare still our contemporary? Müller's last Shakespeare-adaptation of *Titus Andronicus* from 1984 can give an idea: the East-West-conflict is followed by the war between North and South: WELCOME TO HELL NO PITY HERE.

'The "De-Basing" of Shakespeare: A Call to Engagement'

**Dan MacCannell**

Critiques the post-Cold War commercial imperative that all films be, on some level, adaptations, and calls on filmmakers to re-imagine what "based on" might mean. Using extensive excerpts and screen captures, locates "Henry the Tenth" as a "de-based" Shakespearean history play.

"A Pitfall of Cinematic Aspiration: the Reception of Peter Sellars' *The Merchant of Venice*"

**Richard Petengill**

This article chronicles the reception by both audience members and critics of Peter Sellars' controversial 1994 production of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* at Chicago's Goodman Theater, from the point of view of the production dramaturg. The article argues that Sellars' most contested artistic choices (such as his casting of film and television actors unaccustomed to delivering Shakespearean language, and his use of video cameras and monitors onstage) stemmed from his announced ambition to make an on-location film of the production following its run in Chicago, London, Hamburg, and Paris. This pitfall of Sellars' cinematic aspiration - the overall poor reception of the filmic elements he put onstage - ironically made it difficult for him to secure the funding he needed to make his film, and as a result the project never came to fruition.

'A Shared Experience: Shakespeare and Popular Theatre'

**Stephen Purcell**

The theatre for which Shakespeare wrote was a 'popular' one; today, however, Shakespeare is widely perceived as decidedly *un*-popular, representing to many the epitome of elite culture. This article looks at those modern productions and practitioners who have attempted, in various ways, to re-frame Shakespearean performance as 'popular theatre'.

The term 'popular' itself is the subject of close scrutiny, since it is loaded with multiple and often contradictory meanings: we tend to understand the word as a synonym for 'well-liked' or 'in demand', with the added implication when applied to a product that the product is commercially successful, but in a theatrical context we more frequently use it to signify something 'of the people' – immediate, politically progressive, with connotations of the plebeian and the vulgar. This article, then, looks at two (perhaps more) opposing 'popular' Shakespeares: the mainstream Shakespeare (commercially popular but in some senses elitist, embodied here by the RSC) versus the collectivist Shakespeare (with all the radical and political associations of the word, its focus primarily on the establishment of a communal identity amongst actors and audience). The article focuses particularly on productions falling broadly into the latter category, which despite many outward differences in form tend to have in common an increased emphasis on the dual nature of theatrical performance and upon the role of the audience themselves in creating the imaginative world of the play. The work of well-known practitioners such as Peter Brook and Mike Alfreds is looked at in tandem with lesser-known companies such as Vesturport and Illyria to investigate the ways in which a Shakespearean performance might unite its audience in such a 'shared experience'.

'NecrOphelia: Death, Femininity and the Making of Modern Aesthetics.'

**Magda Romanska**

The article focuses on the connections between the 19<sup>th</sup> century theatrical and aesthetic discourse that have turned Ophelia from a stage role into the permanent fixture of Western standards of feminine beauty, touched by death and melancholia. Among the various representations of dead or dying woman emanating from Nineteenth century art, Shakespeare's Ophelia was, according to Richard Altick, the single most often represented theme of that time. In England alone, she "appeared in the exhibitions of the Royal Academy no less than fifty times." She embodied "the cult of invalidism," a fascination with *femme fragile* that reflected the aesthetic *zeitgeist* of the epoch. Although initially associated with female mental disorder, eventually, it was Ophelia's corpse that became an erotic object of the period. In Ophelia, dying became an art, and through her artful death, Ophelia started living an existence independent of the Shakespearean *Hamlet*. Ophelia's body started floating in the Western consciousness, becoming a source of visual production and an identificatory model of desirable femininity. If the Western subject originates at the center of man's relationship with his own death, Ophelia is the source of female subjectivity constructed from the same discourse, except defined not by the

consciousness of language that speaks of and finds itself in death, but by the beauty and fragility that is driven by and forever frozen by death. There were three aspects of the Nineteenth century staging of *Hamlet* that influenced the creation and proliferation of the Ophelia syndrome: the way that her character was interpreted by the Shakespearean critics and theatre directors, the way that she was dressed, and the way that she was edited on stage. Her intellectual inaccessibility, interpreted as either naivety or stupidity, her trans-historical displacement evident in her costume, and, finally, her exclusion from Hamlet's "to be or not to be" soliloquy that veiled her suicide in even more mystery, have all created a psycho-cognitive environment which caused the nineteenth century artists to frame freeze obsessively the scene of her suicide; the scene which, in fact, is not in the play, except as Gertrude's poetic description.

'Seeing, Studying, Performing: *Bell's Edition of Shakespeare* and Performative Reading'  
**Stuart Sillars**

Bell's Shakespeare of 1774-5 provides an important example of how a play is constructed when read rather than seen in performance. Presented as a 'companion to the theatre', it offers itself in competition to the scholarly editions of Pope, Theobald and Johnson, and enjoyed far greater circulation, being issued first in a small octavo format and later as single plays in weekly paper-bound parts. Although it uses the promptbooks of performances at Drury Lane or Covent Garden it gives no detail of scenery, costume or stage business, instead offering materials allowing the reader to develop her or his own idea of performance. Crucial to these are Francis Gentleman's notes, and the frontispiece illustrations. Gentleman's introductions largely concern plot, but his footnotes offer suggestions about performance, discussing possible costumes, the kind of actor best suited to each role, or strategies for playing particular scenes, all offered in a naturalistic manner recalling the descriptive style of the novel. Bell's first edition includes frontispieces that present a single scene from each play within a similarly naturalistic setting, in no way representing a stage performance but instead following the conventions of emergent novel illustration. The individual plays issued later had images of single characters, drawn in outline with no delineation of setting, in poses recalling the stereotypical gestures of Le Brun and other theorists. In this way, the edition offers a series of verbal and visual suggestions from which the reader is free to construct an idea of the play in production. Bell's edition consequently offers important insights into the assimilation of the plays at the end of the eighteenth century, and the process of performative reading in general.