SHAKESPEARE IN PRACTICE

Shakespeare and Digital Performance in Practice

Erin Sullivan

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For my parents—Marla, Rick, Lisa, and Tim—and my brother Ryan.

Thank goodness for digital technology.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, nothing has changed how people experience the world more than digital technology. Alongside the rapid mechanization of the industrial revolution, and the ferocious spread of knowledge that came with the printing press before that, the advances of the digital age stand among the most transformative events in human history. How we share and store information, how we organize social relations, even how we think and behave: all have been profoundly influenced by the ever-expanding reach of digital technology and especially the mobile computer, something we deceptively still call a phone.

This book explores the impact of such changes on theatrical performance—often seen as one of the most live, unmediated, and therefore human forms of art—and the plays of William Shakespeare, thought by many to offer some of the most penetrating examinations of what it means to *be* human. What happens when actors, directors, and audiences start using new technologies to reimagine the meaning of Shakespeare's words, characters, and ideas in performance? How does the way we experience presence, locate emotion, and forge community through Shakespearean drama change with the influence of digital media? This book argues that digitally intensive performances of Shakespeare allow actors and audiences to test what they believe theatre to be, as well as to reflect on what it means to be present—with a work of art, with others, and with oneself—in an increasingly online world. I contend that if theatre as an art form is

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to remain socially relevant and philosophically engaged, then it must be one that grapples with digital technologies in both practical and thematic terms. In the process, such work invites audiences to think more probingly about their own status as digital humans, while also extending the reach of live performance in truly unprecedented ways.

Although the cultural transformations that have come with widespread digitization still feel new to many, there is now a long history to the rise of computing technology. From the development of personal computers in the 1970s, to the building of algorithmic 'Turing machines' in the 1930s, to Charles Babbage's plans for an 'analytical engine' in the 1840s, computer science is far from a twenty-first-century invention. What *has* changed decisively in recent years is the extraordinary rise in everyday computing—indeed, every-minute computing—that has occurred thanks to mobile phones. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf quipped about a palpable shift in sensibility that came with the dawn of modernism. '[O]n or about December 1910 human character changed', she wrote. 'All human relations have shifted … And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature' (Woolf 1924: 4–5). Woolf was right, of course, about a major transformation taking place in society, and especially the way that society represented itself through art. Still, her 'intentionally provocative statement', so blithe in its observation of seismic change, was blatantly 'hyperbolic in its pinpointing of a date' (Mambrol 2016).

There would be little provocative or hyperbolic, however, in saying that on or about June 2007, events were put in motion that would again transform human character and all that springs from it. This was the month that Apple debuted its first iPhone, a device that ushered in a new era in mainstream, human–computer relations. While earlier versions of smartphones existed before this date, and widespread use of them would not come for a few more years, the highly publicized release of the iPhone heralded a new phase in the popularization of mobile computing. Within a decade, 80–90% of people in highly developed countries, including most of Europe and North America, were walking around with continuous access to knowledge of the world—as well as unprecedented amounts of disinformation about it—courtesy of the phones in their pockets (Wigginton et al. 2017: 5; 'Smartphone Penetration' 2017). Such devices transformed what was once a located and intermittent experience—accessing the internet—and integrated it into literally every step of daily life. The way people interact with one another, the way they navigate the physical and intellectual world around them, and the way they understand what is real and what is not have all changed as a result. It's not too much of a leap, then, to suggest that we as people have changed too.

With such shifts in mind, this book focuses on digitally oriented performances of Shakespeare that emerged with the widespread digitization of everyday life in the 2010s and proliferated even more rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic at the end of that decade. While it does at times look further back, both to earlier digital advances and to the histories of other media, the question of what Shakespearean performance looks and feels like in an era of continuous, embodied computing remains its central concern. Of course, the nature of such digital Shakespeares varies significantly depending on where one looks, and one of the aims of this book is to illustrate just how wide-ranging this constantly evolving category of performance has proved to be. In this book, 'digital performance' refers to the staging of theatrical performance by overtly and self-consciously digital means: it includes within its remit live theatrical productions that are recorded and broadcasted digitally; other live theatrical work, staged for in-person audiences, that foregrounds digital technology through the use of real-time video feeds or dynamic, three-dimensional computer projections; and more adapted, born-digital works that engage principally with online audiences and present themselves in some way as theatre. As different as the productions across these three categories can be, they share a profound interest in the forms of presence, liveness, and immersion associated with theatre as an art form, as well as a preoccupation with how digital technologies can both disrupt and deepen these qualities.

Throughout its analysis, this book attends to the interplay between the banal and the extraordinary when it comes to such digital technologies, and the way that the performance of Shakespeare in particular—a figure who, in cultural terms, also oscillates between over-familiarity and wondrousness—recalibrates audiences' perceptions of digital tools and the states of being that they create. A device or effect that might be experienced as entirely naturalized in everyday life can take on new strangeness when presented through the frame of theatrical performance, particularly when those performances are based on plays as canonical, classical, and seemingly traditional as those of Shakespeare. By focusing on Shakespeare, the most-performed playwright in the Anglophone world and a very popular one beyond it, this book at once delimits its investigation to a manageable study and opens it up to a staggering range of digital experiments. As W. B. Worthen has suggested, ‘Shakespeare performance cannot be definitive of performance per se’, but it nevertheless ‘provides a powerful instrument for examining the intersection of dramatic writing, the institutions of theatre, and evolving ideologies of performance’ (2014: 1–2). The long history of Shakespeare in performance also helps throw into sharper relief the striking disparities and sometimes quieter continuities between theatre in a hyper-digital age and that which came before.

At the same time, the insights yielded by such an analysis also work in the other direction, illuminating how different technologies can enable new ways of understanding and engaging with Shakespeare. The interactivity of many digital technologies can break down distinctions between performers and audiences, while the ability of the camera to look closely, to pause, and to replay can reshape experiences of character, story, and emotion. As is the case with all adaptations—and especially the most creative, intelligent, and daring ones—digital investigations of Shakespearean drama help illuminate the richness of these texts and the responses they inspire. The best digital performances of Shakespeare, this book argues, bring together a thoughtful exploration of the nature of live presence, a virtuosic demonstration of a technology’s affordances, and a deep, intelligent engagement with the Shakespearean text.

1.1 *Hamlet* Machines

‘As you read this it is safe to assume that someone, somewhere is performing *Hamlet*’, Paul Prescott writes in his introduction to the play in performance. Among the places you might find the Danish prince, he suggests, are ‘a park, a village hall or a national theatre’—or, we might now add, on some form of screen (Prescott 2005: lix). In many ways, it is fitting that *Hamlet* should prove a particular favourite among Shakespeare’s digital adaptors, given the play’s interest in the scope, and limits, of human agency and ingenuity. It also features the first known instance in English of a person referring to himself as a ‘machine’, both in terms of his physical body and the powers of volition that attend it: ‘Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this machine is to him’, Hamlet writes in his love letter to Ophelia, sometime before the events surrounding his father’s death mean that his life is no longer entirely his own (*OED* 2020: ‘machine, n.’, I.2; 2.2.123–4). The idea that people are engines of both nature and culture, and that their ability to thrive is bound up in each, is inherent to the play itself and its long production history.

In the 1970s, the German theatre-maker Heiner Müller brought the mechanical dimensions of Shakespeare's tragedy to the fore in his deconstructed and postmodern adaptation, *Hamletmachine*. But whereas Müller's vision of the play had more to do with the metaphorical machines of society that strip their subjects of agency and fulfilment, later adaptors have been just as interested in the literal potential of *Hamlet* as a function of technology. Countless *Hamlet*s have now come to life through different forms of digitization, but for now I will focus on just three created in theatrical contexts: a blockbuster broadcast, an avant-garde installation, and an immersive film. In considering how these adaptations have approached the play and the critical responses they have inspired, I offer an introductory glimpse into the wide range of activity that falls within the remit of digital performance as it is understood in this book. At the same time, I illustrate the anxieties such work can provoke concerning the future of theatre, and indeed of Shakespeare: that it is overly commodified and commercial, that it drains the life out of a vital art, and that it pursues novelty at the cost of deep, transformative experience.

In 2015, the Barbican Centre in London made history. Its production of *Hamlet*, starring Benedict Cumberbatch of first television and then Hollywood fame, had become the city's fastest-selling theatrical event, with searches for it on one popular ticket website temporarily outstripping those for Beyoncé and Jay Z's upcoming world tour (Stewart 2014). Even so, the biggest audience for this much-anticipated production, directed by Lyndsey Turner, would not be the 100,000 people lucky enough to see it live and in person in London (O'Brien 2014). Rather, it would be the quarter of a million viewers worldwide who would watch it filmed, edited, and relayed by digital means to cinema screens later that year, plus the many more who would access bootleg copies of it online—and, eventually, a legally streamable version—in the months and years that followed (Hawkes 2015). Although the live broadcasting of theatre to cinemas had by this time been around for several years, it was this production that confirmed just what a powerful cultural, artistic, and economic force this digitally enabled medium could be.

In terms of box office receipts alone, the broadcast was an unprecedented success, due in large part to Cumberbatch's global, social media-supported fandom. By the end of the year it had taken £2.93 million in the UK, where it was screened in 87% of cinemas (Gardner 2015).

In comparison, Justin Kurzel's feature film of *Macbeth*, starring Michael Fassbender and Marion Cotillard, earned £2.82 million in the UK during the same period of time (Hutchison 2015). For perhaps the first time since the earliest days of cinema, a theatre production of a Shakespearean play surpassed a critically successful, star-studded movie adaptation in terms of box office takings. While this was undoubtedly the most striking outcome of the broadcast for financially minded producers and programmers, for theatre-makers and their audiences an even more provocative idea was the possibility that, in artistic terms, the production worked better on a digitized screen than it did on the analogue stage.

Beset by early reviews deeming it a less-than-stellar interpretation of Shakespeare's great tragedy, this 'CumberHamlet', as it was dubbed on social media, received a more positive response once it made its way to the cinema. Whereas Michael Billington, *The Guardian*'s chief theatre critic at the time, found the production over-conceptualized and over-designed, his colleague Lyn Gardner found much to praise in the diversity, enthusiasm, and youthfulness of the cinema audience when she saw it (Billington 2015; Gardner 2015). Turning to the broadcast itself, Gardner further observed how the production—'accused by several critics of being overly cinematic' due to 'its visual swagger' and 'indigo hues'—came 'into its own on the screen' (2015). A once-cavernous set now seemed purposely to dwarf 'the inhabitants of Elsinore … as if personal feelings ha[d] become negated in chilly public spaces', while the 'internal struggles' of Cumberbatch's 'infinitely touching' prince could be clearly seen in detailed close ups on his face (ibid.). In many ways, Gardner indicated, the filmed version had surpassed its parent production by zooming in on and powerfully framing details in the performance that had gotten lost in the vast auditorium of the Barbican's main stage.

The idea that this *Hamlet* worked better as a broadcast than it did in person suggested a new phase in the relationship between live theatre and its digitized, global relay. Few critics failed to note the way Cumberbatch's international fame—itself a product of screen drama and digital connectivity—gave the production a different charge than that typically associated with Shakespearean performance, not least when Cumberbatch made a widely circulated and somewhat paradoxical plea to his fans to stop filming the show themselves on their mobile phones (Brantley 2015; Simkins 2015). Mediation was central to this theatrical venture, but only on certain terms. Whether in the cinematic feel of the staging, or in the media-saturated excitement surrounding Cumberbatch himself, the experience of this production stretched well beyond the thousand people watching it at the Barbican every night. For devotees of the theatre, such a scenario seemed to threaten an already endangered art form by displacing the primacy and preciousness of in-person experience and offering a selection of distributable, corporatized, and celebrity-driven commodities in its place. The fact that the production ended up netting record profits, both at the Barbican and in cinemas, only fuelled concerns that commercial interests had overtaken a purer, more genuinely 'live' approach to theatre-making in this unusually high-profile project.

In the discussions surrounding Turner's *Hamlet*, one can see anxieties emerge about the future of theatre in an increasingly screen-based culture. At first glance, then, the second digitally rich *Hamlet* considered in this chapter offers something very different: a supremely live approach to performance, to small audiences on a limited number of dates, in which the script itself and everything that followed was different every night. And yet, this esoteric production still prompted questions about the way digital technology might empty the life, if not the actual liveness, out of theatrical performance.

Two years before Cumberbatch's *Hamlet*, for four days in December 2013, the Brooklyn Academy of Music hosted the final leg of an international tour of Annie Dorsen's *A Piece of Work: A Machine-Made Hamlet*. At the heart of this experimental project, which brought together theatre-makers and computer programmers, was an algorithm that parsed the text of Shakespeare's tragedy in different ways every night (Cartelli 2016: 433). As the algorithm churned through the play, digitized voices read out the chosen textual fragments and the words themselves appeared on the stage's black backdrop—a 'looming computer screen'—in different fonts, sizes, and colours ('Piece of Work' 2013). Metadata linked to the words triggered music, sound, and lighting effects, and, in the case of the ghost's appearance, released puffs of smoke from a raised platform on the floor (Fig. 1.1). During one of the show's five acts, an actor entered and delivered lines from *Hamlet* selected by the algorithm and transmitted through an earpiece (in New York, Joan MacIntosh and Scott Shepherd alternated the role on successive nights), but otherwise live, human presence was markedly absent from this highly conceptual production. Instead, *A Piece of Work*'s most visible player was the text itself, constantly lighting up an otherwise bare stage and producing an experience that one spectator likened to 'watch[ing] subtitles without an accompanying film' (Levy 2014: 507).

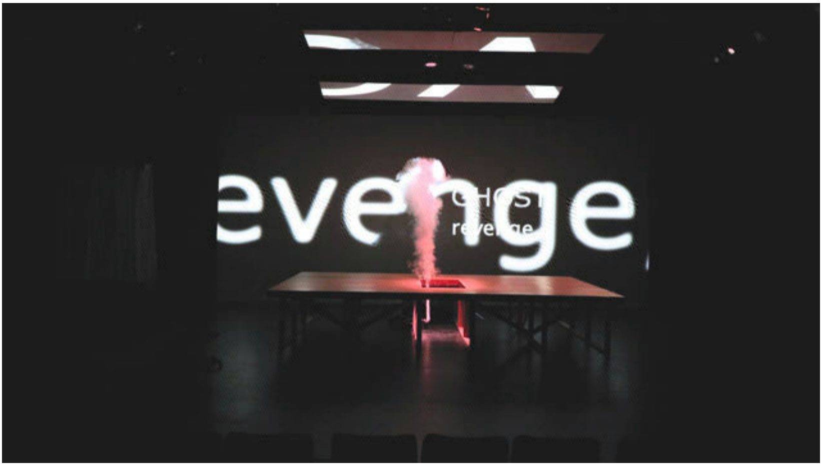

Fig. 1.1 *A Piece of Work* (2013), directed by Annie Dorsen (Photograph by Bruno Pocheron and reproduced courtesy of Annie Dorsen)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, responses to such a deconstructed and disembodied take on the play were mixed. Some theatre critics 'rather liked' the 'shades of meaning, hints of ideas' generated by the dispassionate and unpredictable cuts of the algorithm, which at times produced resonant lines like 'To be and not to be, this is the sorrow' (Kiley 2013). For Charles Isherwood of *The New York Times*, Dorsen's 'puckish riff' created a freshness that helped restore audiences 'to the state of excited disorientation we probably first felt when encountering the exotic syntax and language of Shakespeare' (2013). In these instances, this digital remix of *Hamlet* estranged overly familiar spectators in productive ways, inviting them to find new meaning in an old and even ossified text. Dorsen would go on to win Guggenheim and MacArthur 'Genius' Fellowships for her algorithm-based work, which jurists praised for the way it 'challeng[ed] the definition of a theatrical event' ('Annie Dorsen' 2019).

For the less enthusiastic, however, *A Piece of Work*'s heavy reliance on computer intervention produced effects that were more enervating than enlightening. Some reviewers complained of the loss of narrative and even linguistic sense that came with listening to synthetic voices, full of 'metallic tang', discharge a 'word salad' of 'total gibberish' for the better part of an hour (Isherwood 2013; Kiley 2013). Others described how the lack of live human actors produced a 'bloodless' form of theatre that was more interesting in theory than in practice (Kiley 2013; Cartelli 2016: 456). Of central concern was what happens to *Hamlet* when the humans are gone. In a play so fixated on questions of agency, action, and emotion, what do we get when we 'ru[n] the show with no human intervention', Dorsen asked, and let machines take over instead (Kiley 2013)?

The answer for some spectators was something that was not theatre. Reflecting on her experience of watching the production twice, Jemma Alix Levy argued that theatre as an art form 'requires life' to truly 'live' (2014: 506). 'As often as we hear the assurance that "the text is alive"', she continued, 'the production proved that the phrase is only a metaphor' (ibid.). Without sustained human presence, Levy and others found the project's 'terse reductivism' limiting not only in terms of Shakespeare's text but also in terms of its potential for emotional and intellectual impact (Isherwood 2013). Theatre, such critiques suggest, needs live actors to create drama through bodies as well as words. From this perspective, overly digitized approaches to theatrical performance undermine the fundamental value of embodied presence and the affective meaning it generates.

If the influence of digital technology made Turner and Cumberbatch's theatrical audiences feel secondary, and Dorsen's audiences feel disaffected, then this Introduction's third *Hamlet*—an immersive, 360-degree film released in 2019—attempted to side-step such frustrations by locating spectators at the centre of Elsinore's human drama. Directed by Steven Maler, and produced by the Commonwealth Shakespeare Company in Boston in collaboration with Google, *Hamlet 360: Thy Father's Spirit* used interactive film technology to create an hour-long, virtual reality (VR) experience of the play. The project's aims, according to Maler, were both to 'democratize Shakespeare and theater' and to explore digital technology's ability to make audiences feel like they are 'right there in the room'—not just with the actors, but also with the characters whose lives they inhabit (Harris 2019).

In this production, released for free on YouTube, audience members used a smartphone and a VR headset (whether a high-tech model or an inexpensive, cardboard version) to transport themselves to a three-dimensional performance in-the-round. Once inside the virtual playing space, spectators could look in all directions at a vast but now decaying art deco theatre, cluttered with dilapidated objects including a claw-footed bathtub, a four-poster bed, dozens of glowing lamps, crimson rugs, discarded children's toys, and a broken-down car (see Chapter 5, Fig. 5.4). All the scenes in Maler's heavily cut and remixed *Hamlet* unfolded in this moody, darkened landscape, with new action popping up in different parts of the room and requiring spectators to turn their heads and sometimes the rest of their bodies in order to follow what was happening. Though they could not actually walk through and interact with the set, audiences were free to look wherever they wanted and experience the story from the perspective of the ghost of Hamlet's father. The creative team hoped that locating the viewer within the performance would give them 'a sense of agency and urgency as omniscient observer, guide and participant' ('*Hamlet 360: Thy Father's Spirit*' 2019).

After six weeks on YouTube, *Hamlet 360* had generated more than 30,000 views, though how many of those clicks involved watching the production in full and how many took the form of a curious glance remains unknown. Comments from YouTube audiences ranged from the ecstatic ('That was incredible!'), to the impressed ('A solidly engaging hour of ground-breaking VR theatre'), to the sceptical ('VR is not ready'), to the sneering ('The video quality was so bad I thought I was playing Minecraft for the first 10 minutes') (ibid.). The fact that this hybrid production was filmed and its 'run' took place entirely online meant that few professional theatre critics reviewed it, though Don Aucoin of *The Boston Globe* celebrated the way this *Hamlet* allowed him to feel 'the prince's psychological suffering … in a way that was more immediate, visceral, and inescapable than if I'd been watching a movie, or even a live production if I had a bad seat' (2019).

Aucoin clearly enjoyed *Hamlet 360*'s innovations, but that final caveat—'if I had a bad seat'—betrayed a sense that as interesting as this online endeavour might have been, it still came second to live theatre at its best. Other commentators were less circumspect in their criticism, suggesting that the project was 'pure fad' and 'a tech demo' that 'privilege[d] digital effects over the truly immersive, full experience' of Shakespeare's language ('*Hamlet 360: Thy Father's Spirit*' 2019; Jones 2019). At issue was the question of whether digital tools were being used more for the sake of novelty than in the service of deep engagement with the text. 'At just 61 minutes, this "Hamlet" is both extremely long by the standards of virtual reality and extremely short by the standards of "Hamlet"', wrote *The New York Times*'s Elizabeth A. Harris, and this curtailed running time raised doubts among some theatre-goers as to whether the project could prove much more than an attention-catching gimmick

(2019). In such cases, the idea of digital experimentation seemed to signal something thin and most likely trivial, offering a useful first encounter with a work of art, perhaps, but rarely showcasing its full richness.

Through these three very different *Hamlet*s, and audiences' reactions to them, the wide range of theatrical work that digital technology has enabled in recent years starts to become visible. In some instances, that technology has had more to do with modes of transmission, as in the digital relay of Cumberbatch's live performance, while in others it has involved the staging of digital computing or digital environments, as in Dorsen's algorithmic theatre and Maler's first-person-player stage space. In each case, one can observe new approaches to theatrical performance that are at once continuous with and disruptive of more traditional, physically located, live drama. For while all three of the productions aimed, in some way, to extend theatrical experience, either to new audiences or to new depths, they also prompted claims that they were not really theatre, or, worse, that they threatened the survival of theatre in its most potent form. The fact that they were based on Shakespeare's plays intensified a sense of unease, with many critics worrying that audiences would not receive appropriate exposure to the playwright's work through such adapted, mediated renditions. From these more disdainful responses comes a summary of the worries digital technology has often provoked in terms of Shakespearean performance: that it is too commercial, too cold, and too frivolous.

1.2 Brave New Worlds

The question, then, is why bother studying it any further? First and foremost, there is the promise of widened access. Digital technologies have the potential to dramatically expand audiences' access to theatre, and in doing so to help make the art form more inclusive. The National Theatre's NT Live project, which has been broadcasting since 2009 and included the Cumberbatch *Hamlet*, transmitted to 2,500 venues around the world by 2020, while the boom in online streaming as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic the same year extended audience reach even further ('About Us' 2020; Akbar 2020). Born-digital theatre projects, in turn, have the potential to intersect with vast social media followings and reach an extraordinary number of people. In the case of the Royal Shakespeare Company and Google+'s 2013 *Midsummer Night's Dreaming*, an online project explored in Chapter 5, over 25 million spectators interacted with it in some way (Moffat 2013: 3).

The significance of such numbers is, of course, a matter of interpretation. Research into cinema broadcasts, for instance, has suggested that the socioeconomic diversity of spectators is not as broad as might be hoped, though online streams have been more successful in reaching genuinely new audiences (Barker 2013: 28; 'From Live-to-Digital' 2016: 30–2). One might also question the emotional and aesthetic impact of seeing a flash of theatrical activity on a platform like Twitter or the now-defunct Google+ versus watching a full-length, more traditional production. Finally, access to digital devices and internet connectivity is hugely uneven both across communities and within them. Still, there is no denying that the use of digital technology to distribute theatrical performance creates new possibilities as to who might watch it, and accordingly who might be entertained, moved, and even transformed by it.

Second, there is the reality of an ever-more digitized world surrounding the theatre. There is little question that digital approaches to creating and disseminating culture and art, including theatrical performance, will only become more prevalent in the coming years—a fact made overwhelmingly apparent by the impact of the COVID-19 lockdowns. Even before that, however, arts funding bodies in the UK had been steadily increasing the importance they placed on digital activity when awarding their grants. In 2017, the British government signalled this emphasis in a particularly explicit way when it changed the name of its Department for Culture, Media, and Sport to the Department for *Digital*, Culture, Media, and Sport. The following year, the newly retitled body issued a policy paper called 'Cultural Is Digital', in which it described the 'UK technology and culture sectors' as 'the ultimate power couple' ('Culture Is Digital' 2019: 5).

This move towards a more digitally oriented culture sector can be attributed to both the potential for new technologies to increase access to publicly subsidized work, as discussed above, and the undeniably central role such technologies play in twenty-first-century life. The internet is a lifeline that connects families, friends, colleagues, and all different forms of support services to one another, even as it is a scourge that enables the circulation of harmful misinformation, bilious hatred, and crushing insecurities. Even for those who work hard to keep their lives offline, there is no avoiding the influential presence of digital culture altogether. Those