Connected Communities

Shakespeare’s Global Communities

Erin Sullivan, Paul Prescott, Paul Edmondson
Background

Executive Summary

‘Shakespeare’s Global Communities’ is a collaborative research review of the 2012 World Shakespeare Festival (WSF), which was one of the key strands of the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad. The project sought to document through 131 review essays and blog posts each of the Shakespeare-related performances and events that were linked to the Festival, asking the central research question: ‘What does the WSF reveal about Shakespeare’s status as a site for intercultural community building in the twenty-first century?’ The central manifestation of the project was the interactive website www.yearofshakespeare.com, where all review essays, blogs and podcasts were uploaded and where participants across professional and cultural communities could post their own responses to the WSF via discussion threads, Twitter and Facebook. The project involved two one-day workshops in which members of different professional communities involved in WSF activities met to discuss the questions the Festival raised about Shakespeare in relation to British cultural politics, national identity and the global creative economy. The full report highlights three key issues explored during the project: the politics of global performance, new methods for cultural participation, and the growing significance of digital engagement and preservation in the humanities.

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Key words

Cultural politics
Global performance
Cultural participation
Publicly-funded arts
Digital engagement
London 2012 Olympics

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In addition to this core research group approx.
25 more cross-professional participants from
the UK, US and Europe wrote reviews and/or
blog pieces about the Festival for the project.
Shakespeare’s Global Communities

The Politics of Global Performance

While Shakespeare has since the eighteenth century been identified as England’s ‘national poet’ (Dobson, 1992), the WSF’s strongly multicultural, multinational and multilingual treatment of his works has sought to reposition him as the ‘world’s playwright’ in the twenty-first century (WSF, 2011). Such a move can be viewed as both destabilizing and reinforcing Shakespeare’s cultural hegemony, and by association British cultural influence. Many scholars have noted the parallel development of the British Empire and Shakespeare’s global reach, and post-colonial performances of Shakespeare have repeatedly been shown to be bound up in questions of cultural and political debate, obedience and dissent (Bharucha, 1993; Kennedy, 1993; Loomba and Orkin, 1998; Orkin, 2005).

The WSF performances, more than half of which were performed by non-UK theatre companies and in languages other than English, likewise raised questions about Shakespeare and Britain’s colonial legacy, although not in a uniform manner. Several reviewers suggested that WSF productions coming from post-colonial and developing countries found ways of subverting assumed power dynamics and taking ownership of the political questions and aesthetic choices involved in the play they were reinterpreting – often by moving the central focus away from overtly political readings (Dymkowski, 2012; Lee, 2012; Sanders, 2012). In other instances companies drew attention to and expanded political content present in the source play, using it to bring attention (both serious and comic) to a range of national and international political issues such as the Arab Spring (Hansen, 2012), homophobia (Prescott, 2012a), the war in Iraq (Bennett and Carson, 2012) and economic crisis in the Eurozone (Purcell, 2012b). Reviewers also highlighted the difficult issues that were raised when one culture was perceived to be ‘performing’ another culture, provoking debates about how the boundaries of cultural community identity are negotiated, challenged and policed in the twenty-first century (Prescott, 2012b; Rumbold, 2012; Smialkowska, 2012).

Over the course of the project, and especially during the Olympic and Paralympic period, reviewers were also sensitive to the ways in which UK-based companies and institutions found in Shakespeare a means of voicing differing ideas about Britishness. While several productions ‘decentred’ Shakespeare, moving away from The Bard as a symbol of British achievement (Orford, 2012; Purcell, 2012a; Sharpe, 2012), other performances consolidated Shakespeare into a revised, but none-the-less triumphant, narrative of British cultural pre-eminence (Rokison, 2012). This was particularly apparent in the deployment of Shakespeare in the Olympic and Paralympic Opening and Closing Ceremonies (Sullivan, 2012a; Wells, 2012).

The variety of political views and approaches presented in the WSF challenged any single account of what Shakespeare means in a global context. Rather, the project showed that Shakespeare continues to be reworked by cultural communities to voice a variety of political views and concerns, at times contradictory. One perhaps surprising discovery during the project period was the value of the cultural disagreements that arose in response to some of these contradictions. In several instances WSF productions prompted debates online and in the media about race, religion, cultural sensitivity and social opportunity in the UK (see comment threads...
in Cowie, 2012; Dickson, 2012; Rumbold, 2012). Although at first glance such arguments might be read as a negative by-product of the Festival – that is, a stirring up of cultural discontent or frustration – the project took the view that such discussions in fact helped bring to greater public attention the different viewpoints that exist in the UK about what it means to be a multicultural nation. In the words of one of our extended network members, ‘What’s most important [about the WSF] is that the questions around Shakespeare are making an impact beyond Shakespeare.’

Further research into the potential for arts programming to stimulate broader cultural debate and cultural activism is recommended, in particular methods for fostering and encouraging this discursive element of cultural participation (see below). In light of the diverse and at times conflicting messages presented via Shakespeare during the WSF, the project team also recommends further work on what the critical legacy of the WSF will be, both in terms of (1) how its diverse messages are assimilated into cultural narratives about Shakespeare’s global communities and (2) the role cultural investment will play in subsequent ‘mega-events’ such the Olympics in both the UK and abroad.

[Erin Sullivan]

New Methods for Cultural Participation

‘Shakespeare’s Global Communities’ marked an important moment in the evolution of academic reviewing of Shakespearean performance. Historically, journalistic and scholarly responses to theatrical productions have been targeted at very different readerships and have therefore existed in parallel but separate universes (Mazer, 1985). The anti-journalistic foundational principles of academic Shakespearean reviewing have until recently gone largely unquestioned and have dominated academic reviewing for the whole of its sixty-year history – as Jeremy Lopez has noted, theatre reviews in Shakespeare Quarterly today ‘look and sound pretty much like they did in 1950, 1960 or 1970’ (Lopez, 2010; Armstrong, 2008).

Building on the work of Armstrong, Lopez and a range of recent collections, our project at www.yearofshakespeare.com provided a platform for a new approach to Shakespearean reviewing. This had a range of implications for the ways in which reviews were both created and consumed, and for the tone and tenor of the reviews on the website and in the subsequent published volume. One of our aims was to address a wider malaise of academic insularity and isolationism, an aloofness that all too easily looks like elitism (McDonald, 2007). As editors, we were clear in commissioning these reviews that their purpose was to speak to as wide an audience as possible. Although we would not be awarding (or withholding) stars, like national newspaper critics or like primary school teachers inspecting homework, we would welcome criticism that was evaluative, outspoken and judgmental. At the same time, we would not pretend to definitive expertise on every aspect of the production in front of us; we would, on the contrary, see the review as an opportunity to ask questions, express doubts and provoke responses. As we wrote in our brief to reviewers: ‘The written response we have in mind is something of a hybrid – part blog, part review, part provocation, depending on the writer and his/her experience of the production. We are not looking for an authoritative, densely detailed and argued verdict on the production, more a lively,
unguarded and informal set of thoughts and impressions.’

The homepage alone of www.yearofshakespeare.com received 12,615 page views between 23 April and 1 November 2012, with the reviews and blogs receiving an estimated further 25,000 views (based on initial figures). 45 percent of visitors to www.yearofshakespeare.com returned after their first visit and our readers came from ninety-one different countries. One of our principal aims was to eliminate all notional barriers between our scholarly reviewers and our readers, who – presumably – came from a variety of backgrounds, so the site (and the small amount of non-internet publicity – e.g. programme adverts – that accompanied it) repeatedly invited readers to become writers and post their own thoughts and comments. Many of our readers accepted the invitation and chose to respond to the critic (see comment threads for Lucas, 2012; Massai, 2012; Prescott, 2012a; Sharpe, 2012), and in some cases members of the production’s artistic team used the forum to elaborate on questions raised in the responses (Buckley, 2012; McLuskie, 2012; Sullivan, 2012b). Some reviews prompted lively exchanges that not only serve an immediate cultural purpose but which will also form an invaluable archive of reception for cultural and theatrical historians of the future. But when we establish the successor to this site (www.reviewingshakespeare.com) we will have to revisit and advance our strategies for generating this kind of interaction.

Future work seeking to build on this scoping project might therefore focus on two key questions: (1) how best can we generate user interaction and participation on sites devoted to what is generally perceived to be high culture (i.e. a subject on which education and expertise are widely seen as prerequisites for critical authority and the right to have an opinion)?; (2) how do readers actually use reviews and other forms of writing about performance, literature and the arts? To elaborate on the second question: it would be very useful and revealing to know, for example, how many readers read online reviews because: (a) they have seen the production in question and want to develop their understanding of it by reading, more or less, passively, the thoughts of others; (b) they have seen the production and wish to develop their understanding through digital conversations with others; (c) they have not seen the production and want to read other’s thoughts before deciding whether to or not; (d) they have not seen the production, have no possibility and/or intention of doing so, but want to read other’s thoughts to e.g. stay up to date with wider/expert opinion. Such research would help us better understand the nature of online communities such as the one/s formed by www.yearofshakespeare.com; it would also test the hypothesis that ‘to participate in high art is to forgo the direct and unmediated perception of the artwork itself. The principal consequence is the dependence of one’s own judgment of artistic quality on the judgment of others’ (Shrum 1996: 9; Bourdieu 1986).

[Paul Prescott]

Digital Engagement and Preservation

The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust was always going to be well placed to help articulate this fascinating research project to a wider constituency of non-specialist, but even so, www.yearofshakespeare.com has considerably exceeded our expectations.
Not only has every single one of the 73 productions on stage and television been reviewed, but those reviews have attracted many thousands of page-views around the world. Theatre is ephemeral and if it weren’t for the Year of Shakespeare project the WSF would not have been properly and critically documented in the way it now has been. It was the Honorary President of The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Stanley Wells C.B.E. (Professor Emeritus, University of Birmingham) who suggested that the blog-reviews be published as book, now forthcoming in April 2013 from Bloomsbury Publishing.

The SBT’s commitment to the project will extend through keeping the archive digital and physical archive of the project open until 23 April 2014 (the 450th anniversary of Shakespeare’s birth). We are inviting people to add their comments to the online blogs of www.yearofshakespeare.com. It does not matter whether they saw a particular production; they can still respond to the reviews and the sense they give of a cultural moment. People are invited to choose from among their favourite Shakespeare plays, find the reviews and comment on them. They can do this via Twitter, Audioboo or Soundcloud (using #WSF2012).

The Year of Shakespeare digital project will be preserved by The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and sit within a ‘Trusted Digital Repository’ as part of the collections, publicly accessible at The Shakespeare Centre on Henley Street, Stratford-upon-Avon, CV37 6QW (www.shakespeare.org.uk and scla@shakespeare.org.uk). Alongside these will be the Festival theatre programmes and the project’s administrative archive, including the recordings of the two workshops held in June and September 2012. We are also inviting people to submit written accounts of productions, donate press-clippings of reviews and related articles, and photographs taken during the WSF. By the time the UK hosts the Olympics again, eighty or so years will have passed. We want future generations to be able to find out as much as possible about this extraordinary year and how audience felt about it: 2012, a Year of Shakespeare.

How might we develop the project further? What lessons have we learnt? In our view most of the Research and Project Partners, though hugely supportive and enthusiastic about the project, were not digitally connected enough to enhance the project’s major profile online. We should like to seek ways of developing further the digital expertise and outlook of our Research and Project Partners in order to give added impetus to the online circulation of our digital platform. We would also seek more assistance in the filming of video blogs and soundposts to post on the site, thus enhancing its engagement potential.

[Paul Edmondson]

Outputs to date

Website/dataset

Edmondson, Paul, Paul Prescott and Erin Sullivan, eds. Year of Shakespeare, www.yearofshakespeare.com (approx. 130,000 words, 90 reviews, 40 blog posts, 50 authors, 60 audience ‘vox pop’ interviews, 40 Storify production response threads, 270 comments, thousands of social interactions via Facebook and Twitter).

Edmondson, P., Prescott, P. and Sullivan, E., eds. Reviewing Shakespeare, www.reviewingshakespeare.com (forthcoming 2013, expanded open reviewing platform allowing for collaborative coverage of global...
Shakespeare performance outside of and beyond the WSF).

**Library archive/dataset**

Edmondson, Paul and Amy Hurst, managers. ‘Year of Shakespeare Archive’, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Collections, Stratford-upon-Avon, actively collecting materials until 23 April 2014, held in perpetuity and publically accessible.

**Books**


To include:

- 74 revised reviews of WSF productions and events
- New pieces including Foreword by Stanley Wells, ‘Olympic Performance in the Year of Shakespeare’ by Erin Sullivan, ‘Nightwatch Constables and Domineering Pedants: the past, present and future of Shakespearean reviewing’ by Paul Prescott and Epilogue by Paul Edmondson

Prescott, Paul and Erin Sullivan, eds. *Olympic Shakespeare* (in preparation for 2014/15, chapters commissioned from research team responding to key issues raised during the WSF).

*In addition to the outputs listed above, several research team members have been involved in further papers, presentations and blogs relating to WSF programming and events.*
References and external links

As part of our scoping activity we produced reviews of all WSF productions, as well as several related blog features. A full listing is available at www.yearofshakespeare.com/read

In addition to this we produced an annotated bibliography of key scholarship on Shakespeare, globalism and Olympic celebration, accessible at www.citeulike.org/group/16695

Project reviews and blogs cited in report:


Additional works cited:


The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

“to mobilise the potential for increasingly interconnected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.”

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC’s Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx