

## Book Reviews

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***Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation.* Gemma Kate Allred, Benjamin Broadribb, and Erin Sullivan, eds. New York: Arden Bloomsbury, 2022. 278 pp. \$99 (cloth); \$79.20 (eBook). ISBN 978-1-3502-4780-2; 978-1-3502-4782-6.**

***Viral Shakespeare: Performance in the Time of the Pandemic.* Pascale Aebischer. Elements in Shakespeare and Performance. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 105 pp. \$22 (paper and eBook). ISBN 978-1-1089-4796-1; ISBN 978-1-1089-5238-5.**

Two studies of Shakespearean performance during the UK's Covid-19 lockdowns—Pascale Aebischer's *Viral Shakespeare: Performance in the Time of the Pandemic* (2021) and the edited collection, *Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation* (2022)—open with mirroring anecdotes. Aebischer's study begins with the closure of the theaters in March 2020, while *Lockdown* chooses as its starting point their re-opening a year later. This period, as Benjamin Broadribb, Gemma Kate Allred, and Erin Sullivan highlight in *Lockdown Shakespeare*, was quickly and mistakenly heralded as a time when theaters “went dark” (220) and even a “year of lost theatre” (1). This narrative is productively challenged by both studies, whose focuses turn to the breadth and ubiquity of digital Shakespearean performance during this critical period of the pandemic.

*Viral Shakespeare* was, aptly, “born-digital” as part of the Cambridge University Press's “Elements in Shakespeare and Performance” series. In a study that blends “phenomenological history” (8) and “personal memoir” (9), Aebischer traces the digital innovations and her concomitant viewing habits through case study examples during two UK lockdowns (March to July 2020 and October to December of the same year). Aebischer's analysis is refreshingly engaged with the lockdown performance activities of UK and European theater-makers, which included, of course, a large portion of archival releases and re-releases. Likewise, her standing as a scholar of digital Shakespeares allows *Viral Shakespeare* to at once embrace the subjectivity of Aebischer's own lockdown experience and to continually engage with wider negotiations of community and presence. From her unique vantage point, Aebischer is well-placed to reflect on how the experience of Shakespearean performance in both isolation and virtual community was sometimes rich and almost always strange. Such analysis gives welcome—albeit necessarily individual—depth to the often-frustrated question of how digital performances of Shakespeare were experienced by audiences during lockdowns.

To call *Viral Shakespeare* either entirely a phenomenological history of Shakespearean performances during the UK's lockdowns, or a memoir of Aebischer's experience watching these, belies a number of the study's broader contributions. Reflections on Aebischer's fatigue and annoyance at technological glitches, for example, sit comfortably alongside incisive commentary which reframes debates about spectatorial engagement and the spatial dynamics of early modern theater. These reflections are mutually elucidating in a way that provides an enviable model of critical analysis. It is a model which, I suspect, flourishes precisely because of Aebischer's broad-ranging engagement with and expertise in both the digital theater of the lockdowns and the study of Shakespearean performance.

If *Viral Shakespeare* self-consciously frames the experience of Shakespearean performance during the pandemic from an individual perspective, *Lockdown Shakespeare* examines the same period through a multiplicity of voices. Indeed, the collaboration and (authorial) co-presence of *Lockdown* allows the collection itself to symbolically counter the generalization that watching digital performances during this period of enforced isolation lacked a sense of communal experience. One of the collection's greatest strengths lies in this collaborative structure, which gives space both to critical frameworks for understanding lockdown Shakespeares and to the creative decisions of many artists and creatives who produced them. The latter manifests in a series of case studies in the midsection of the collection, sandwiched between chapters on critical and historical approaches, and a "Year in Review" from the collection's editors. The result is a study of Shakespeare performance in this period which offers a range of perspectives, particularly on the labor and processes of production. Nor does the collection shy away from considering the political implications of this labor in the context of the UK government's systemic undervaluation of the arts and the precarity of many freelance performers. Another benefit of *Lockdown Shakespeare*, then, is found in the collection's focus of attention largely away from "Big Theatre" and toward the variety of choices taken by smaller UK- and US-based companies.

In its tentative taxonomy of digital performance modes (Zoom-to-YouTube, Shakespeare in Pieces, etc.) through which Shakespeare flourished in this period, *Lockdown Shakespeare* also has a measure to contribute to existing fields of study. While the lines of enquiry here are long-standing and familiar within critical understandings of digital performance—liveness, filmic grammar, audience experience—the collection goes beyond its own caveat as a "rapid-response" project to contextualize this period of (recent) theater history (5). Where these broader reflections are sometimes harder to distinguish, it is often owing to the flexibility of form in the collection: chapter to chapter, the material frequently demands to be met on its own terms as it switches between prose, dialogue, journal, and analysis. In this regard, *Lockdown Shakespeare* both inherits from and replicates the formal experimentations taken in response to the pandemic by many of the productions it studies.

It has been noted in these works and elsewhere that the proliferation of digital theater—both prerecorded and live—during the pandemic blurred the distinction between past and present as archived theatrical performances sat alongside new, born-digital ones (Kirwan and Sullivan 2020, 491). These studies capture a dif-

ferent kind of temporality: a distinctly in-the-moment critical understanding of what it meant to experience Shakespearean performance during the pandemic. *Viral Shakespeare* and *Lockdown Shakespeare* offer critical records of experience. There is an open-handedness to the way both studies approach the timeliness of their work. *Lockdown's* “Year in Review” transposes what is often the privilege of the recurrent journal into a stable print record, while Aebischer’s approach in *Viral* offers space on the page to the plague-time records of Dekker, Defoe, and Pepys. While often tongue-in-cheek, the way Aebischer’s work in particular plays with, and alludes to, the conventions of plague narratives suggests just one of the many ways in which these studies open exciting critical spaces. That is to say, if *Lockdown Shakespeare* and *Viral Shakespeare* showcase part of the creativity that proliferated through and beyond Shakespeare’s works in 2020, they also remind us of the potential for such criticism to function as an act of witnessing and recording. Intermingled with criticism that allows us to reflect on the responsive developments in digital theater during this period, the frankness and depth with which both studies engage with the experience of watching and rewatching Shakespeare in a state of lockdown will enrich our future understandings of what the playwright came to mean in this period.

#### REFERENCES

Kirwan, Peter, and Erin Sullivan. 2020. “From the Editors of the Special Reviews Section: Shakespeare in Lockdown.” *Shakespeare Bulletin* 38 (3): 489–93.