



Rycroft, E. K., & Maria, S. (2024). Shakespeare in Action. *Shakespeare*, 20(2), 159-168. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2024.2315062>

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[10.1080/17450918.2024.2315062](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2024.2315062)

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## **‘Shakespeare In Action’: Introduction**

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When a group of travelling players arrives at Elsinore in *Hamlet*, they are invited to perform at court and are subsequently treated to a lengthy set of instructions by the Prince of Denmark about the dos and don'ts of acting. The key takeaway, according to Hamlet, is that care must be taken to ‘suit the action to the word, the word to the action’.<sup>1</sup> In other words, there must be congruence between the verbal and physical elements of what makes a successful performance. When the players eventually perform the play, they first act it out in dumb show before proceeding to a scripted version, in which physical action is accompanied with speech. The dumb show boils down the substance of the play into pure ‘action’ before it is expanded and the players have the chance to implement the Prince’s advice about suiting words to actions. The ‘action’ of the play-within-a-play is thus doubled, offering the court’s audience a two-fold experience of ‘the Murder of Gonzago’, unsurprisingly, perhaps, as Hamlet deploys this theatrical performance to ‘catch the conscience’ of his uncle and reveal his guilt for the murder of Old Hamlet. The double performance, which confronts its intended audience with the murder twice over, thus affords two opportunities for Claudius’ conscience to be stimulated into action, leading him to reveal his apparent guilt as he starts up from his seat and leaves the show, evidently ‘distempered’ (3.2.292).

It is significant that the process of catching Claudius’s conscience begins with the dumb show’s particular theatrical form of pure action, although it remains unclear whether the dumb show is performed at Hamlet’s behest or, more likely, at the players’ own initiative.<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Lopez writes that, as a mode of performance, dumb shows ‘seem to give us both more and less than we want. They cheapen spectacle by providing an excess of it, and cheapen language by rendering it merely or ambiguously supplementary to action’.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in the case of the court performance at Elsinore, actions are not quite louder than words, as it is only during the speech-and-action performance that Claudius is sufficiently affected by the spectacle to leave, although it is impossible to tell what part the dumb show might have had in prompting this affective response. While the play(s)-within-the-

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor and Thompson, eds. *Hamlet*, 3.2.17-18.

<sup>2</sup> In his earlier advice to the players, Hamlet appears to scorn ‘inexplicable dumb-shows and noise’ (3.2.12). On the ‘inexplicability’ of dumbshows, see Michael West, ‘Pleasures of Enigma’.

<sup>3</sup> Lopez, ‘Dumb Show’, 292. On the related matter of action and textual loss see Stern, ‘Inventing Stage Directions’.

play demonstrate the power of dramatic performance and staged action to elicit affective and physical responses from their audience, they also point up the asymmetry and competing authority of text and action on the early modern stage, not recognised in Hamlet's overly prescriptive formula of suiting actions to words, and vice versa, which takes as a given that dramatic performance ought to be anchored to text.<sup>4</sup>

Our starting point for this special issue was a series of related questions about these types of processes in the present moment: how *do* we, how *can* we, and how *should* we 'suit' the action of a given performance to the word, or word to the action? How does our understanding of 'action' as a concept and as a process change across different media, spaces, modes, and eras of performance? The articles in this special issue provide a range of possible answers to such questions by considering a variety of stage, film, and audio productions and adaptations, showing how a multivalent approach to 'action', broadly defined, can illuminate our understandings of Shakespeare's plays and the directorial, interpretative, and technical processes that animate them as performance. This special issue is therefore concerned with the methods and practices that facilitate putting Shakespeare into action, such as adaptation, acting, direction, and production processes. However, it also moves beyond action that may be found in the theatre to incorporate social action and the actioning of text for political purposes. It centres the 'doing' of Shakespeare, and how that doing can generate political commentary, social change, methodological innovation, and new forms of performance analysis beyond 'the text'.

The special issue emerges from a period of inaction, of the enforced domesticity of the COVID-19 pandemic. But even in that climate new ways of actioning Shakespeare were found, from digital theatre and online readings, to podcasts and audio plays. The pandemic led creatives, theatre-makers, actors, and audiences to respond innovatively to the challenge precipitated by lockdowns and public safety restrictions, turning to new technologies and online platforms to put Shakespeare's plays into action during a difficult and uncertain time.<sup>5</sup> The pandemic landscapes of theatre-making and Shakespeare performance shifted the boundaries of where performances could take place and where they could be consumed. The 'action', as it were, was brought straight into audiences' living rooms and domestic spaces, as actors were brought into shared online performance spaces from their respective real-life locations.<sup>6</sup> The economic impact of the pandemic on the theatre industry put many

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis of the dumb show and its functions in the play see Cox, *Figurative Design*.

<sup>5</sup> The pivot to online performances is discussed by scholars and practitioners in Allred, Broadribb, and Sullivan, eds. *Lockdown Shakespeare*. See also Aebischer, *Viral Shakespeare*, Sen, ed. *Digital Shakespeares*, and Myles and Clayman-Pye, *Innovation & Digital Theatremaking*.

<sup>6</sup> This dynamic shares some characteristics with live theatre performance broadcasts, which also make performances available to remote audiences, but do so from within space of the theatre. On theatre

theatre-makers' and practitioners' livelihoods at risk, but the necessary – if challenging and unanticipated – turn to digital theatre-making opened up new avenues for innovation, creativity, inclusivity, interaction, and new questions about what constitutes 'action' and performance. For example, from the early days of the pandemic *The Show Must Go Online* staged digital performances of Shakespeare's First Folio plays, bringing together creatives from all over the world in a way that would have been impossible in person, while Creation Theatre (England) collaborated with Big Telly Theatre Company (Northern Ireland) to produce an immersive Zoom performance of *The Tempest* (2020, dir. Zoe Seaton) during the first UK lockdown, which called for various types of audience participation, 'creating a sense of community, a rare opportunity in a socially distanced world to come together with strangers and act as one'.<sup>7</sup> Creation Theatre built upon their repertoire of digital productions and went on to produce an innovative, interactive digital *Romeo and Juliet* (2021, dir. Natasha Rickman) that blended 'live performance, filmed scenes and choose-your-own-adventure style gameplay', bringing audiences into the play-world by giving them agency over elements of the action.<sup>8</sup>

The agile adaptation of performance practice in response to the economic pressures and changed theatre environments of the COVID-19 pandemic is but the most recent development in a long history of Shakespeare's plays in performance. Within Shakespeare's own lifetime, players capitalised on new performance opportunities such as touring and occasional performances at home and abroad.<sup>9</sup> In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, groups of English players travelled to various parts of Northern Europe (indeed, even to Elsinore itself) to seek new economic prospects during times of plague closures or in the face of other professional pressures, and there they were faced with the conundrum of how best to suit words to actions as they performed their plays in new linguistic and cultural contexts. Players initially performed adapted versions of their plays in English to non-English speaking audiences in the Netherlands and in German-speaking lands in present-day Germany, Austria, Poland, and parts of the Czech Republic, which did not yet have a culture of professional theatre. Although over time the plays were adapted into local languages, the initial English versions of plays compensated for the audience's lack of linguistic comprehension by

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broadcasts, see Aebischer, Greenhalgh, and Osborne, eds, *Shakespeare and the 'Live' Theatre Broadcast Experience*.

<sup>7</sup> Allred, 'The Tempest', 537. On *The Show Must Go Online* see Myles and Clayman-Pye, *Innovation and Digital Theatremaking*.

<sup>8</sup> Company's description of the show quoted in Ginestet, 'Romeo and Juliet', 106. Consult also Broadribb, 'Romeo & Juliet' and Rycroft, 'Romeo and Juliet'.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Keenan, *Travelling Players*; Limon, *Gentlemen of a Company*; Schrickx, *Foreign Envoys*; Brandt and Hogendoorn, eds., *German and Dutch Theatre*.

streamlining the plots and paring down descriptive elements in favour of physical action, whether that entailed stage violence or comic material.<sup>10</sup> Despite the language barrier, the plays proved popular with Continental audiences, who were drawn in by the novelty of professional performance and its attendant clowning, music, and other physical feats. Clearly, the processes of transnational performance undertaken by travelling English players necessitated new ways of suiting words to actions and actions to words, and led to new ways of putting English dramatic material into action.

All of this, of course, assumes that we agree what ‘action’ *is* despite the fact that as a concept it troubles definition; both a noun and a verb, action is a thing done, as well as an act of doing. Furthermore, action and performance are so enmeshed that, for thinkers from Aristotle to Stanislavski, they are virtually synonymous. For Aristotle, tragedy is famously ‘an imitation of an action – grand, and complete in itself ... performed by actors rather than told by a narrator,’ and a mode through which catharsis, or the purification of emotions through ‘pity and fear’ is achieved.<sup>11</sup> For Aristotle tragedy *is* action, whether on the page or on the stage, and both ‘character’ and ‘thought’ are subordinated to the predominant ‘plot’. However, Aristotle also outlines a series of ‘mediums’ and ‘modes’ – such as song, diction, and spectacle – which might be distinguished as elements of theatrical or performative action: elements which flesh out the textual ‘skeleton’ of a play script. Tennessee Williams similarly imagines that, ‘a play in a book is only a shadow of it, and not even a clear shadow of it,’ and, in a further metaphor, ‘hardly more than an architect’s blueprint of a house not yet built or destroyed.’<sup>12</sup> Harvey Granville-Barker, meanwhile, compares reading a play to ‘reading the score of a symphony and asks as much skill,’ repeating the analogy in *From Henry V to Hamlet* when he asserts that, in the absence of a performance, the scholar is like ‘a man reading the score of a symphony, humming the themes.’<sup>13</sup> These musical and architectural metaphors imagine the playtext as an impoverished version of the theatrical event, divested of the very forces that *make* it drama.

What Williams and Barker suggest is missing from the reader’s experience is performative action – set pieces and blocking, acting, improvisation and clowning, fighting, dancing, the actions and gestus of performer, lights, costume, sound and set, as well as the actioning of text through

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<sup>10</sup> These adaptation processes are discussed in the introductions to the Arden Shakespeare editions of four early German adaptations of *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Taming of the Shrew* and *Titus Andronicus*. See Erne, Hazrat, and Shmygol, eds. *Titus Andronicus and Taming of the Shrew*, and Erne and Seidler, eds. *Hamlet and Romeo and Juliet*.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, Book II, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Tennessee Williams, ‘Afterword’, *Camino Real*, 122.

<sup>13</sup> Granville-Barker, *Exemplary Theatre*, 32; *From Henry V to Hamlet*, 28.

interpretation. All of these actions theatricalise or animate the score of the script, coming under the banner of what Patrice Pavis describes as ‘visible action’ or ‘the entire *process* [...] of visible transformations on stage on a concrete level.’<sup>14</sup> However, performance theory has also moved far beyond the literary view that a theatre production is merely a version of the text, with William Worthen definitively placing performance itself at the heart of theatre’s meaning-making capacity: ‘Performing reconstitutes the text; it does not echo, give voice to, or translate the text.’<sup>15</sup> Drama, for Worthen, forms part of a citational matrix insofar as it reproduces past performances alongside the play:

A performance of *Hamlet* is not a performance of a text. Instead, it uses a text (usually a palimpsest of texts) of *Hamlet* within a specific selection of available regimes of production (acting style; set and costume design; the representational rhetoric of stage, film, or video) to perform a new iteration of *Hamlet*.<sup>16</sup>

Worthen does not specifically mention staged action here, but there can be no doubt that the ‘regimes of production’ to which he refers include it, and that understanding how action operates across production history as well as individual performances is key to understanding Shakespeare.

Worthen’s sense of performance as partly the (re)iteration of past performances broadens our understanding of action as not delimited to the time and space of a particular production, suggesting that stage actions, too, have consequences. In line with the fact that ‘action’ is both noun and a verb, what is ‘done’ during a performance continues to be an ‘act of doing’, reverberating and regenerating meaning through theatre archives, in published writing and recorded media, in re-stagings, revivals, homage and pastiche, in individual and collective memory, and wider society more generally. However, progressive outcomes are not necessarily either desired or assured, and in the case of Shakespeare, the results are very often conservative or even retrogressive. Overtly patriotic versions of *Henry V*, such as Laurence Olivier’s wartime film version (1944), serve as examples of the former; but even as recently as 2015, Trevor Nunn was criticised for his ‘whitewashed’ trilogy of *The Wars of the Roses*, whose cast did not feature a single person of colour, or disabled actor, a decision the director defended on the demonstrably false basis of ‘historical verisimilitude’.<sup>17</sup> Ayanna Thompson warns that that the consequences of staging Shakespeare are rarely straightforward and that his body

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<sup>14</sup> Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Worthen, ‘Drama, Performativity, and Performance’, 1097.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 1102.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Owen, ‘Trevor Nunn’.

of work remains, largely, ‘a colonial tool.’<sup>18</sup> At times, regressive effects are beyond the theatre-makers’ control, as Thompson explains:

reception is never simply determined by the production itself. Instead, reception is complicated not only by the immediate effects of the production (what is being staged, where it is being staged, when it is being staged, etc.), but also by a larger, multilayered history of viewing (which bodies have historically been made objects, which bodies have historically been made subjects, which bodies have historically been allowed to be spectators, etc.).<sup>19</sup>

Many of the authors in this special issue address the difficulties and complexities which Thompson identifies, but also recognise the opportunities of engaging with ‘Shakespeare in action’ in critically productive and methodologically innovative ways, taking up the challenge of this slippery term via multiple approaches and traversing variegated ideas of what it means to ‘activate’ Shakespeare’s plays.

A number of essays in this special issue extend Thompson’s concern with performance as a form of action which can decentre Shakespeare by considering how performance acts as a medium for social justice by exploring the radical potentialities of actioning Shakespeare. Marissa Greenberg powerfully argues that Dominic Pettman’s concept of ‘sonic intimacy’ can be applied to podcasts to produce new possibilities for political engagement among their audiences.<sup>20</sup> Reimagining Sara Ahmed’s notion of the ‘willful subject’ in Shakespearean terms as ‘Will-ful subjects,’ she shows that attending carefully to the production, casting and dramaturgical choices of Shakespeare plays as

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<sup>18</sup> Thompson, Karim-Cooper, and Sterling Brown, ““Unicorns and Fairy Dust””, 555. Postcolonial and decolonial studies of Shakespeare encompass a large body of work that has interrogated Shakespeare as a tool of colonialism and cultural imperialism, while also showing how his works can be reappropriated. Scholars working in Premodern Critical Race Studies and Critical Indigenous Studies have produced invaluable scholarship on Shakespeare’s plays and the intertwined issues of colonialism, race, and unequal power relations. Key publications in these fields since c.2000 are listed in the crowd-sourced, annotated bibliography initially compiled by Hannah Ehrenberg, Peter Erickson and Kim F. Hall: [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1AaMp1al8y715FklUq1x5scqBHYS9QpzvMzgYU\\_ZyFow/e/dit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1AaMp1al8y715FklUq1x5scqBHYS9QpzvMzgYU_ZyFow/e/dit)

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, *Colorblind Shakespeare*, 13.

<sup>20</sup> On political engagement and podcasts, see Marissa Greenberg’s guest edited special issue of *Early Modern Digital Review*.

podcasts might make possible ‘the incremental homework necessary for radical, collective transformation’. Greenberg uses the New York Public Theatre’s 2020 audio production of *Richard II* as her case study: placing its performance in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement, she demonstrates that the potential for social change is rooted in an action on behalf of the listener, more specifically in the podcast auditors’ act of will to hear the ‘sounds of suffering’. Such active listening can lead to activism in the intentional becoming of Will-ful subjects, with ears both attuned and (re)trained to hear the ‘broader soundscape of injustice’ when Shakespeare is encountered through auditory media.

Louise Geddes also analyses the consequences of producing Shakespeare by examining what Worthen might call the ‘citational practices’ that have historically built up around plays and identifying a phenomenology of ‘embodied fidelity’ in terms of how we ‘do’ Shakespeare, which exerts a stultifying effect on performance. This phenomenology positions productions which challenge his cultural and political capital in the form of ‘adaptations, revisions, or updates’ as provisional or temporary, and so reinscribes the inequalities enshrined in Bardolatry. Fantasies of authenticity attached to the ‘celebrity play’ then, reinforce status quos which performance has extensive potential to critique and subvert. Geddes demonstrates that through processes of embodied fidelity, faithfulness to imagined texts frequently reproduces historically embedded ableism, fatphobia, sexism, classism, linguistic imperialism and racism all in the name of Shakespearean ‘truth’ and theatrical ‘success’.<sup>21</sup> Resonating with Greenberg’s sense of the podcast’s role as a tool for political change, Geddes posits that ‘embodied infidelity’ may be a strategy for undoing some of the inequities that have accrued over centuries of Shakespearean performance.

Geddes’ challenge echoes through Sara Reimers’ account of the problems and opportunities produced by her direction of *The Taming of The Shrew* for Lazarus Theatre Company in 2017. Putting Shakespeare into action is to sometimes find oneself in a politically and professionally compromised position, and Reimers illuminates the series of choices that were made to mitigate this danger in order to produce an iteration of *Shrew* that challenged the play, while at the same time achieving commercial viability. In her article, Reimers reflects upon the difficult process of wrangling with a problematic play and explains how she alighted upon the framing device as a way of reimagining the play as a joke that has gone too far, placing the onus on the audience to decide what is funny and what is not, and to consider how their action of laughing might contribute to and (re)create an unequal world.

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<sup>21</sup> Many of these issues are also touched upon in relation to a wide variety of adaptations in Fazel and Geddes, eds, *Shakespeare and the Variable Object* and in Corredera, Pittman, and Way, eds, *Shakespeare and Cultural Appropriation*.



In her contribution, Bailey Sincox investigates an adaptation of *Macbeth* which similarly confronts and negotiates its problematic aspects, particularly in relation to Black femininity. In her compelling reading of American Repertory Theater's *Macbeth in Stride* (2021, dir. Whitney White), Sincox's focus is on the staged action and dramaturgical reinvention through which its performers renegotiate their relationship to the play, and so construct a place for Black subjectivity within and against it. Conceptually and theatrically exploring the idea of taking collective strides, alongside taking Shakespeare 'in stride', the production emerges as another example of an 'embodied infidelity' which appropriates the iconicity of Shakespeare – a source of cultural capital – to examine and reimagine minoritized people's relationship to universalizing narratives, and ultimately to disavow what cannot be reconciled.

Jason Eng Hun Lee's article also considers the universal and the particular, but with regard to screen adaptations of *Hamlet*, focusing on *Haider* (2014, dir. Vishal Bhardwaj) and *Prince of the Himalayas* (2004, dir. Sherwood Hu), to investigate how Shakespeare can be activated in explorations of disputed borders within the context of the Tibetan Himalayas, and showing the push and pull of resistance and censorship when such a politically sensitive region is invoked as the setting. The frontier landscape is itself put into action by these films in the deployment of a 'strategic exoticism of place' which builds on previous film representations for commercial appeal, but also pushes beyond them. Lee's careful reading of their symbolism, production choices and dramaturgical changes, identifies a plethora of ways in which a 'universal' Shakespeare is made to speak to and for a range of audience who may straddle, 'multiple boundaries of the local, global, and national'. Despite some trenchant contextual and commercial limitations placed upon the films' directors when exploring this contested territory through the lens of *Hamlet*, both Hu and Bhardwaj nevertheless action Shakespeare's play through adaptations which contain a sublimated political critique, or, as Lee puts it, 'Shakespeare's continuing popularity in India, and his reputation as an exemplary Western playwright in the Chinese context, have enabled film directors to use him as a cultural tool to empower subaltern voices, albeit asymmetrically.'

A different approach to the processes of putting Shakespeare's plays into action is offered by Kaethler, Malone and Roberts-Smith, who take up the challenge of action in relation to the multiple temporalities of the promptbook. Using the archives of the Stratford Ontario festival, the authors theorize three types of action produced by the promptbook: 'anticipated acts, unanticipated acts, and idealized polychronic assemblages'. The authors envision promptbooks as objects with agency which are 'vibrant and polychronic theatrical, textual assemblages that ... are always defined by the multiple modes of action they cue, accumulate, or inspire.' As such, they are documents which are 'ontologically active' in and of themselves, or – to use Bruno Latour's term – an 'actant'. These ideas

are demonstrated in relation to the promptbook of *The Tempest* (2005, dir. Richard Monette) in which the authors identify ‘multiple actions over different times’. Notably, the authors draw attention to the recording of ‘unanticipated acts’ or the memorialisation of action that occurs during the course of a stage run, which may be recorded nowhere *other* than the prompt book. In addition to complicating the ways that the promptbook serves as both ‘text *and* action’, they also show the ways in which this artefact exceeds both categories. As polychronic actants, promptbooks offer multiple entry points to consider stage action in terms of dramatic history, textual materiality, semiotics, theatre theory, and performance analysis – despite the fact that their sole purpose is ‘efficacy’. By showing how promptbooks can illuminate ‘action as a fundamental feature of theatre onstage, in text, and across time’, the authors demonstrate that they are a gateway to further action – whether in terms of our thinking, writing, teaching or theatre-making.

The articles that we have brought together in this special issue, then, each propose new ways of approaching, theorising, and engaging with ‘Shakespeare in action’. Many of the interventions presented here centre on ‘action’ in terms of social action, benefitting from the greater understanding – driven largely by Premodern Critical Race Studies and Critical Indigenous Studies – that the performance of Shakespeare is never neutral, but rather variously implicated in conservative or progressive political systems to which theatre-makers (and audiences) must be attuned. These critical fields, together with Disability and Mobility Studies, as well as Queer and Trans Studies each offer new pathways for thinking about ‘action’, performance, and their resonances. Certainly, our authors suggest that awareness of sonic action, of breaking free from existing and dominant paradigms of Shakespeare performance and production histories, of carving space for new voices and perspectives through adaptation or directorial intervention, as well as finding new ways of activating the riches of the archive, might change the way that we conceptualize Shakespeare’s plays in action.

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