

# "Thou Art Translated": Peter Sellars's Midsummer Chamber Play

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## Abstract

For over sixty seasons, the Stratford Theatre Festival in Canada has annually showcased notable performances in dramatic arts and musical theater. Peter Sellars's chamber-play appropriation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, performed for Stratford's 2014 season, broadens the experience of Shakespeare to invite divergent, and often troubling, interpretive strategies. Appropriating the sprawling comedy to convey instead unsettled intimacies and disconcerting eroticism, the chamber play suspends the mirth a seasoned Shakespeare audience member expects from watching one of the bard's most frequently performed comedies. Closely considering festival audience expectations in the context of the largest classical theater repertory in North America, I furthermore illustrate the ways the performance challenges the principles of privileged access and inviolable universality underwriting the festival experience. By creating internal fissures *in* the Shakespeare experience, the chamber play underscores the possibilities for reassessing what we mean *by* the Shakespeare experience.

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*A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Chamber Play*, by William Shakespeare. Stratford Festival. July 24-September 20, 2014. *Director*, Peter Sellars. *Set and Installation Designer*, Abigail DeVille. *Lighting*, James F. Ingalls. *Sound*, Tarek Ortiz. *Performers*, Sarah Afful, Dion Johnstone, Trish Lindstrom, Mike Nadajewski.

"Reduce. Reuse. Recycle" — a pithy statement to capture one's first impression of Peter Sellars's chamber-play appropriation of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, performed for Canada's Stratford Theatre Festival during the 2014 season.<sup>1</sup> To materialize the catch phrase, the Masonic Concert Hall was fully converted into an industrial waste container with scrap metal and decrepit furniture hanging from the ceiling over the audience. Set and installation artist, Abigail DeVille, mounted large and looming objects overhead: bent car fenders, old chairs, metal scraps, broken wood beams, an old lawn trimmer, rusty bed frames, and old television monitors, spread over a backdrop of crumpled, purple-shaded aluminum foil. There is a feeling of danger, even in sitting, lest these objects drop from overhead. There is a sense of demise, seeing objects

with no apparent beauty and no immediate use. And yet closer inspection yields a different effect. Six of the old chairs were taken from the Stratford Shakespeare Festival's historical opening in 1953. Many of the materials are from the largest costume and props warehouse in the world, representing sixty years of the festival's material history, or junk, depending upon your point of view. Indeed, the transformation of space anticipates a bifurcated gaze, provoking questions such as: Is the set an expansion of the components that constitute the Stratford Theatre Festival, or an irreverent treatment of the material culture of the festival's history? Beyond the remarkable use of props, can this performance even be considered *A Midsummer Night's Dream* if it is devoid of the play's intricate plots and vivacious characters? Why evoke Shakespeare's comedy if the title merely thwarts the expectations it evokes? Can the performance be called "Shakespearean" at all if it renders the bard's language unmoored from its original context by the chamber play's emphases and aesthetics? By resetting and recasting the Shakespeare play — using only four actors to perform Shakespeare's multi-plotted comedy of varied characters, extreme emotions, and volatile desires — Sellars's chamber play explores the concentrated intensity of the chamber play aesthetic, thus emphasizing the desires that shape subjects and the cruelty that underlies passions. In Anna Westerstahl Stenport's study of August Strindberg's foundational chamber plays, she finds that "In these plays' spectacular and morbidly engrossing denouements, Strindberg allows a radically different spatiotemporal conception of embodied subjectivity to take center stage. In these plays, the investigation settles, metaphorically and literally, on the interior" (2007, 35). Appropriating the sprawling comedy to convey instead troubled intimacies and disconcerting eroticism, Sellars's chamber play denies the laughter a seasoned Shakespeare audience member expects from watching one of Shakespeare's most frequently performed comedies. Closely considering festival audience expectations in the context of the largest classical theater repertory in North America, I furthermore illustrate the ways in which the performance challenges the principles of privileged access and inviolable universality underwriting the festival experience.

### Stratford Theatre Festival: Then and Now

For over sixty seasons, the Stratford Theatre Festival has annually showcased notable talent in stage management, design technology, costume craft, dramatic arts, and musical theater. It has been dubbed Canada's national theater — which rings true, if not in any official capacity, certainly in size and scope, the festival boasting approximately half a million viewers per season. Managing a \$57.4 million budget in 2014 (under 10% of which comes from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario provincial government), the festival has met most of the stated aspirations of its 1953 opening, which Arnold Edinborough described in a 1954 article in *Shakespeare Quarterly*:

"as momentous for Canada as the founding of the Old Vic was for England, or the Abbey Theatre for Dublin" (1954, 50). The festival's first artistic director, Tyron Guthrie, invokes nationalism, profitability, and cultural authority as they overlap at the inception of the festival: "Canada is busting with money and more importantly, busting with a sort of XXth century nationalism — they want to scrawl their names on the wall of history."<sup>2</sup> Whether or not this graffiti is best inscribed using Shakespearean ink is a question Canadian theater historians have productively considered.<sup>3</sup> With special attention to the Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project, Daniel Fischlin notes that "Shakespearean sites of production have proliferated in Canada across multiple media, diverse ethnicities, and multiple ideologies" (2007, 3). But even amidst the manifold Canadian productions of Shakespeare, the Stratford Festival is recognizably unique in its commitment to classical theater. If, as Mark Thornton Burnett assesses, festivals constitute a kind of "Shakespearean franchising" (2011, 445), the Stratford brand is "classical" and "traditional" writ large. Indeed, Margaret Groome declares that the Stratford Shakespeare Festival was "the answer to the quest for cultural respectability," emerging as "the longed-for national icon, as both cultural commodity and cultural authority" (2002, 125, 108). The dominance of the festival as international emblem of Canadian high art prevails as indelibly linked to the influential commodity of Shakespeare, made apparent in the "About Us" section of the Festival's official website:

With William Shakespeare as its foundation, the Stratford Festival aims to set the standard for classical theatre in North America. Embracing our heritage of tradition and innovation, we seek to bring classical and contemporary theatre alive for an increasingly diverse audience. ("About Us" 2017)<sup>4</sup>

To this end, Stratford casts marquee names in theater alongside experimental stage visions, using traditional acting practices but with innovative casting choices. Some festival highlights include *The Tempest* (2011), featuring Christopher Plummer as Prospero with Indonesian-born, American actress Julyana Soelistyo as Ariel floating and flying across the stage on wires. *Twelfth Night* (2012) infuses rock music into the Shakespeare play to enliven a show starring Brian Dennehey. Stratford thereby blends traditional realism with progressive performance possibilities, but usually without deviating from the model of a recognizable Shakespeare adaptation. Furthering the mission of inclusion and multiplicity, the current artistic director, Antoni Cimolino, marked the 2014 season with novelty, for the first time having the same play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, performed during the same season with two different directors, cast members, and venues. With Shakespeare still as its foundation, the layering of contemporary social politics evoked by two risk-taking

directors — Chris Abraham and Peter Sellars — was meant to diversify the theatrical experience. But while Sellars is part of the "innovative" and "diverse" Shakespeare sprinkled throughout the festival experience, his chamber play goes beyond a non-traditional adaptation and into the realm of a provocative appropriation. So remote from the usual fare is Sellars's production that his chamber play required the manufacturing of an entirely different stage, despite four permanent stages being available for the festival's offerings.

At the main Festival Theatre, one of four established theaters constituting Stratford's permanent stages, Chris Abraham's socially conscious performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is framed by a modern, same-sex wedding. The celebration is the premise for a group of friends improvising a "backyard" Shakespeare performance. In highlighting the range of sexual orientations of the group of friends, Abraham foregrounds the fluidity of modern gendered identities as these parallel the arbitrariness of early modern gender expectations throughout the play. For instance, casting a female actor, Tara Rosling, as Lysander instigates a renewed look at Egeus's refusal of consent. Her sexual pursuit of Bethany Jillard's Hermia suggestively defies premarital conventions. And yet, rather than explore the staging of same sex desire (which is not at all the same as staging a same-sex wedding), Abraham conveniently veils lesbian relations with stage props. A frolic coinciding with Lysander's persuasion that "One turf shall serve as pillow for us both; / One heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth" and Hermia's resistant "do not lie so near" (2.2.40-43) is left to the imagination as the two women's shadows scamper within a camping tent. In another instance of interrogating the performance of gender, Evan Buliung and Jonathan Goad interchangeably play Titania and Oberon on different nights, each cross-dressing into the fairy queen's bridal-type gown. While these choices provide contemporary grounds for the play's sexual politics, they also suspend any serious interrogation — or as the camping tent proved, occlude any actual perception — of the vexed and contested experiences of same sex couples in the twenty-first century. Instead, featuring the falsetto voice and the hairy-chested Titania's drag queen simulation, performed by a male actor who will play Oberon the next night, the gender-switching scenes are hilarious but far from critically provocative. The political intervention prompting inclusivity and diversity is thus subsumed under the imperative of a good laugh.

### Peter Sellars's Appropriation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

For Peter Sellars's four-actor, radical appropriation of the frolicking comedy into an intimate chamber play, a fifth stage was transformed in the Masonic Concert Hall. In Maria M. Delgado's overview of Sellars's career, she highlights the director's attention to the classics as an intervention in contemporary political and social conflicts. She states, "These productions brought

audiences into contact with the darkest recesses of the human psyche, asked unpleasant questions about complicity, guilt, and moral responsibility, and refused to provide easy or comforting answers" (Delgado 1999, 206). Sellars's chamber play — constructed outside the usual parameters of Stratford's stage offerings yet constituted by Stratford's material history — calls into question conventions of spectatorship in a festival context by exposing the "darkest recesses" of desire percolating under the play's comic surface and in doing so, withholds the one thing we can usually expect from a comedy: laughter. Sellars defies audience expectations for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and heightens the way private emotions shape social identities by imposing upon the marquee festival comedy the aesthetics of a chamber play. It is precisely by means of the chamber play's emphasis on the interior motivations of desire — a motivation marked primarily by cruelty — that the appropriation calls attention to audience expectations. The disjunction between expectation and affect is apparent even in considering the promotional materials leading up to the performance. Publicity posters and pamphlets for Sellars's chamber play show a modern interpretation of the pastoral. Two males and two females comprise a young, attractive, smiling group gathered around, enjoying a picnic and casually singing to a guitar. Even prior to overcoming the staging challenges of reformulating Shakespeare's play, Sellars's chamber play is already in tension with the expectations about what kind of picture matches the headline *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Apart from the cast, nothing about the promotional picture accurately predicts the experience of the performance. Sellars's chamber play is literally no picnic; not a jot of casual banter or joyous gathering is to be found. Even the quintessence of charming servitude, Puck, played by Sarah Afful, hotly grumbles that she will "put a girdle round the earth in forty minutes" (2.1.175). She stomps heavily around the stage, looking out into the audience as if facing down a dare. Afful's acerbic Puck is one of the ways in which the play incites one volatile confrontation after another. Margaret Jane Kidnie precisely captures the experience of the chamber play's many powerful scenes when she claims, "One doesn't really 'watch' a sequence like this — one is battered by it, one survives it" (Kidnie 2016, 17).

### August Strindberg's Chamber Play Aesthetics

Much of the chamber play's emotional volatility is generated by moments of sexual intimacy that occur when they are least expected, an eroticism that stresses the aesthetic developed by August Strindberg in 1907 for his Stockholm theater, conceived as *Intima teatern* (intimate theater). Yet intimacy is not synonymous with seclusion; thus, the chamber play's focus on the sexual motivations of the psyche is not without far-reaching social consequences, as Lynn R. Wilkinson claims in her study of the genre. She observes that "Strindberg almost always ties

his psychological interests explicitly to questions of power, domination, sexual difference, and politics" (Wilkinson 1993, 464). This observation is applicable to the portrayal of Helena and Hermia in that seemingly innocuous scene about Hermia's beauty and the lovers' plan to steal out into the woods. In it, Sarah Afful's Helena and Trish Lindstrom's Hermia aggressively push against each other in an intensely physical encounter. Their foreheads and chests are squared; they are simultaneously locked in opposition and in embrace. Sellars explains his desire to capture the ways "our hearts and our minds bounce wildly from love to hate, from anger to contentment, from irritation to repose, and from self-absorption to a wider concern for others" (Sellars 2014, 9). A scene that is frequently performed as sisterly consolation and alliance is here transformed into an uproar of resentment and attraction. Despite their seething anger, the female characters' aggression is no less charged with sexual tension, engaging issues of erotic desire alongside a broader scrutiny of the limits of female sexual agency. Another instance indicative of the overlaps between private sensuality and public commentary is Oberon's raging plea for the changeling boy. The demands directed at Titania are brutally insistent and physically aggressive. The changeling boy is played by Dion Johnstone as Theseus, whose prowess as a conquering black man is established in the play's opening lines. As the clingy changeling boy, however, he is enveloped in the tender caress of Titania's arms while she possessively clutches, grabs, and grinds him. Keeping in line with the chamber play's preoccupations with infusing the drama of domestic relationships with the profundity of collective anguish, the scene's changeling boy represents the couple's conflict beyond a petty quarrel. When Oberon, played by Mike Nadajewski, desperately wrenches the boy from Titania, his pleas permeate with the hysterics of one reacting to the optics of miscegenation. This scene of triangulated desire is thus not only a rewriting of a domestic oedipal conflict but also charged with the racist undertones of Oberon's hysteria. Sellars appropriates audience expectations for Shakespeare and the aesthetics of the chamber play to heighten the way emotional interiors shape social identities. Oberon and Titania's contest therefore transitions seamlessly into the same cast members playing Lysander and Hermia escaping into the woods. As Sellars warns: "Identities twist and shift and morph and warp across hallucinations, psychic projections, willful blindness, haunting premonitions, and layers of regret that will never go away" (Sellars 2014, 9). This is apparent, for instance, as Mike Nadajewski transitions between Oberon and Lysander. The intensification of Oberon's jealous anger informs Lysander's hostile aggressions, displacing what seems like a private conflict between Oberon and Titania into a wider misogynistic attitude that assaults the vulnerabilities of a woman in love. Wilkinson notices this trajectory as part of Strindberg's chamber plays when she traces how they generate "part of a narrative that questions and redefines traditional notions of public and private and of the role of

politics within individual psychology and the home" (Wilkinson 1993, 465). As desire permeates through morphing identities, the transmission only intensifies it. When the same actor playing jealous Oberon shifts to Lysander attempting to make love to Hermia, his violent urgings to lie together, as "two bosoms interchained with an oath" (2.2.49), is close to rape and seems causally, if not logically, to follow the aggravations of his previous role as the frustrated fairy king. Akin to Strindberg's intimate theater, the precise and seamless transitions of characters from one personal anguish to another, from one emotional interior to another, privileges the private implications of what is a sprawling, multi-plotted play. In doing so, Sellars's chamber play troubles the politics of spectatorship underwriting Shakespeare's comedy.

By tracking the difference between the promotional materials that match the headline *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the precarious experience of watching the chamber play, one begins to notice what is at stake. In her theorization of dramatic theater as a "social gathering," Susan Bennett observes that "in much contemporary theatre the audience becomes a self-conscious co-creator of performance and enjoys a productive role which exceeds anything demanded of the reader or the cinema audience" (Bennett 2003, 21). But as the chamber play reveals, an audience's productive role involves not just reacting to the performance as it unfolds; it also includes the negotiation of varied factors beyond what they are viewing — factors such as the drama's confirmation of previous knowledge brought by play readers and the performance's conformity to the viewing expectations of seasoned theatergoers. Sellars forces into investigation the habits of theater spectatorship that align with the aesthetic discernment of a privileged community of patrons on whom the festival depends and for whose pleasure performances are tailored. This pleasure is often marked by laughter; indeed, laughter is the only time an audience member is allowed, even encouraged, to make noise during a performance. In his study of contemporary drama, Mattias Broth pursues a methodology of how "members of the audience achieve audience status" (Broth 2011, 113).<sup>5</sup> In it, he shows the importance of laughter in establishing a shared experience: "Members of the audience do not laugh independently from what is happening around them. Instead, to be able to laugh aloud, it seems that they have to coordinate themselves with the other participants to the theatrical situation, both actors and other members of the audience" (Broth 2011, 122). In his historical analysis of audience affect, Jeremy Lopez establishes humor's unifying function: "Laughter bridges the distance between the stage and the audience, shows the audience to be happily complicit with whatever is going on on-stage" (Lopez 2003, 174). For both theater critics, laughter is the public and shared experience of an audience reaction, one that binds them to the performance and to each other. But in the context of festival Shakespeare, or what Douglas

Lanier theorizes as "destination" theater (Lanier 2002, 154), I contend that laughter is both a spontaneous reaction to a humorous moment and an anticipated opportunity to establish one's privileged expertise of Shakespeare. Laughter emerges not just as a marker of enjoyment, but also as confirmation of a shared experience as knowledgeable consumers of the bard. So in turning the comedic expectations promised by the promotional materials into an emotional tour-de-force and minefield of eroticism, Sellars withholds the recognition and identification indelibly linked to the laughter Shakespeare audiences come to expect when watching *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The most striking transformation from Shakespeare comedy to chamber-play tragedy occurs during the meta-theatrical moments involving Dion Johnstone's depiction of the amateur thespian, Bottom. When Bottom seeks to "play Ercles rarely, or a part to tear a cat in, to make all split" (1.2.25-26), he has none of the hyperbolic self-importance we can readily mock. Instead, he is earnest, fiery, majestic — in fact, rather convincing as a tyrant. The agonies of representation that vex Bottom's unfulfilled ambitions alert us to the harsh misfortune of being denied a part he wishes to play and is shown to be capable of playing well. Sellars sabotages our expectation to laugh at linguistic failures and theatrical follies. The final act's revision of a botched "Pyramus and Thisbe" is acted with the longing and tenderness suited to tragedies. Gathered around the dying Pyramus, the hard-handed men convey kindness and compassion far exceeding the same actors' previous depictions of lovers. Beyond the parody of an Ovidian narrative, Bottom's death as Pyramus is a passionate and poignant meditation on unfulfilled possibilities. No longer a hammed-up routine to turn theater's shrewd social criticism to itself, "Now die, die, die, die, die" (5.1.295) is both resignation to self-annihilation and an angry taunt directed at the audience. Johnstone's performance heightens our awareness of emotions often derided or erased by the comedic expectation of Bottom's folly. The biblical malapropism — "eye of man hath not heard" (4.2.221-22) — is not a bungled exclamation of wonder but a terrified and anguished plea, a testimony to the cruelty of laughing at someone else's loss. To experience a sliver of love and adoration, only to find it stripped and mocked, is depicted as an unbearable disappointment. The performance forces a look at Bottom for the first time, who Johnstone plays as fraught and at times openly weeping, coinciding with a renewed understanding of the play's unrelentingly cruel language.

### Reception and Reviews

The chamber play's cruel and mirthless performance was widely documented in the reviews. As Robert Cushman of the *National Post* observes about Helena, "in a notable departure from just about every other production of the play, neither her complaints . . . nor her subsequent repeated



throwing of herself at [Demetrius] are treated as being in the least comic" (Cushman 1, 2014). Charles Isherwood of *The New York Times* also noted that "this most surefire of Shakespeare comedies has been bleached of every ounce of humor" (Isherwood 2014). Like *The New York Times*, widely distributed news outlets such as *The National Post* and *The Globe and Mail* noticed the deletion of humor and the intensification of emotion, while suspending any outright condemnation of Sellars's deviation from comedy. Theater bloggers were far less ambivalent about their assessment of the "bleach[ing] of humor." *Reviews by Robyn* is representative: "So about twenty minutes into the performance . . . the audience ceases to care . . . There is no gentleness, no humor, no forgiveness" (G. 2014).<sup>6</sup> *The Slotkin Letter*, also a popular blog site directly accessible through the Stratford Festival's official website, published a similar sentiment: "Me, I hated it. Hell would be having to sit through this raging, joyless, loveless mess again" (Slotkin 2014). Anecdotally, I can confirm that many sided with the bloggers, including festival organizers and marketing strategists with whom I conversed about the play. The discontent of those unwilling to "sit through" the play was palatable, mostly because the venue does not allow a graceful way to exit. Audience members walked out.

In his book *Studying Shakespeare in Performance*, John Russell Brown contends: "Clearly a study of the plays in performance should try to take into account the composition, experience, and response of the audience" (Brown 2011, 197). Such a study would be especially revealing when the response is markedly hostile. Habits of viewing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are highlighted precisely because the appropriation of Shakespeare in the chamber play resists these habits. Audience members would laugh at "the usual" moments, as one would expect from closely knowing or previously watching the play. But their mirth seemed jarringly strained before a scene in which actors are sobbing or seething. Expected cues for laughter were simply absent. Laughter is integral to viewing habits because it functions, in the way sociologist Gail Jefferson theorizes in her study of intimacy, as a recognition point (Jefferson 1974, 7). In the context of Shakespeare theater, laughter acknowledges an intimacy with the play, one enjoyed by a privileged community that Douglas Fowler has coined "cultural custodians" (Fowler 2014, 213).<sup>7</sup> Laughter can confirm an elite group's influential status as judges of taste and arbiters of interpretation.<sup>8</sup> Without it, audiences lose the recognition points that establish their ideal-audience status as Shakespeare custodians, and are thus potentially denied the pleasure of public consumption of Shakespeare's cultural capital. In pushing beyond what some audience members consider to be Shakespearean, the performance interrogates the institutionalization of Shakespeare in a festival context and turns the critical gaze from stage to spectator. Sellars's chamber play, in its removal of "recognition points" and defiance

of what Broth calls "the distinctive character of different kinds of institutional interaction" (Broth 2011, 114), challenges the privileged authority of an influential community of patrons by bringing to the fore the proprietary compulsion of rejecting "deviations" from classical Shakespeare.

It is therefore of note that the Stratford Theatre Festival embraced — by that I mean actively promoted, extended, and financially backed — Sellars's "deviant" appropriation of Shakespeare. Some reviewers applauded the choices made by Sellars and, by extension, recognized the risks taken by the festival. Kelly Nestruck of *The Globe and Mail* observes, "Peter Sellars's production busts many myths that have been built up around the plays of William Shakespeare and how they are best done — myths that Stratford, you would think, has an institutional interest in maintaining" (Nestruck 2014). That most of the festival's reputation lies in the spectacle and respectability of classical Shakespeare theater seems precisely to be the point in contention. The pleasure of laughter in a comedy, as is the spectacle of the emotions in a tragedy, is the expected product consumed by an influential demographic for which such performances are staged. Resisting the expectations of a Shakespeare comedy to explore the severe emotions of a chamber-play production undercuts the habits of theater spectatorship in a festival context. This tactic is in line with the director's approach to Shakespeare not as a classical icon but as a contemporary lightning rod. Matthew Kozusko observes of Sellars's engagement with the bard: "For Sellars, Shakespeare is both a story that needs fresh reading and a theater tradition that needs reinventing" (Kozusko 2009, 725). The appropriation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a form of "fresh reading" but one that, in the context of a festival experience, defies the aesthetic discernment of an erudite clientele to determine what counts as Shakespeare, forcing into investigation habits of viewing that risk foreclosing alternative Shakespearean experiences.

### Broadening the Shakespeare Festival Experience

Thus, Sellars's chamber play broadens the experience of Shakespeare to include new forms of interpretive strategies, despite the potential displeasure of those on the patron list (and it is a long list, occupying approximately thirteen pages of the play bill). Sellars's chamber play eschews the importance of public endorsement by appropriating Shakespeare in a way that is so radically unrecognizable as to be unacceptable or inaccessible to many on that list. But what if, as P. A. Skantze theorizes, "accessible veils its true meaning of consumable" (Skantze 2014, 131)? If so, the forms of rejection expressed by audiences — some by departure, some by apathy — could directly affect the viability of a theatrical institution that describes itself as "North America's largest classical repertory theatre company" ("About Us" 2017). The performance foregrounds the role the audience plays in the commercial interaction of a theatrical performance — habits

of spectatorship shape the spectacle, demand the respectability, and generate the pleasure that constitute the Shakespeare festival franchise — and thus keeps that franchise viable. But by creating internal fissures *in* the Shakespeare experience, the chamber play underscores the possibilities of reassessing what we mean *by* the Shakespeare experience.

So denied the spectacle, respectability, and mirth of a Shakespeare comedy, what do we get from what one critic called "this joyless mess"? We get what no twenty-five-year festival patron ever gets: to see a Shakespeare play for the first time. Seasoned viewers struggle to track characters as they morph from one to another. Sophisticated spectators are assailed by unexpected and often uncomfortable emotions: genuine pity for Bottom, fear of Puck, disgust at Titania. Shakespeare aficionados react to and ponder lines that echo the play text but are strangely re-accented, re-formed to stress the cruelty of language unfettered by the comfortable cues of comedy. Sellers exacts from the audience unusual interpretations of, and uncomfortable reactions to, the play's depiction of desires. Erotic, ambitious, imaginative desires do not function to amuse; instead, they are displayed in earnest desperation to evoke an empathic encounter typically occluded by derision. Festival patrons are thrust into the volatility, the thrill, and let's face it, the indifference, of experiencing Shakespeare's play without the crutch of recognition, without the rewards of familiarity. Audiences are transformed from established, nuanced viewers of Shakespeare to struggling, shocked, challenged, even surprised spectators of a play they have heard of, but never actually seen. Audience: thou art translated.

### Notes

1. I wish to express gratitude for the permission granted by the all of the talented actors featured in this article and to acknowledge the assistance of Stratford Theatre Archives in facilitating my requests. This work is dedicated to my Wright State University study abroad students who have enriched my experience of the Stratford Theatre Festival through the years. It is through their eyes that a short trip north opens a world of possibilities.
2. This letter from Tyron Guthrie to Alex Guinness, dated 11 September 1952, is housed at the Stratford Festival Archives and quoted in Richard Knowles (1995). Founding father, Tom Patterson, evoked the success of Stratford-upon-Avon when proposing to turn Stratford, Ontario as a site for Shakespeare theater in Canada. Patterson lured Tyron Guthrie from the British theater with the promise of artistic freedom and a hearty investment in lavish spectacles.
3. Daniel Fischlin asks, "why perpetuate Shakespere-centrism in the name of complex national signifying practices supposedly seeking a degree of autonomy from their colonial precursors

as embodied in the iconicity of Shakespeare, the fraught symbol of colonial cultural dependency?" (2002, 314).

4. The Festival's website has since changed the "About Us" section; the version quoted here can be found at <http://www.stahome.org/stratford-festival/>.
5. Broth theorizes audience laughter in his claim that "in deciding when to react, [audiences] not only monitor the actors, but also their fellow audience members. Analysis of the full corpus shows that, if no one accompanies them, members of the audience regularly either stop laughing or change the character of their laughter very quickly — often within the time space of a syllable — and thereby visibly orient to the fact that laughter can only be done collectively in this particular situation" (2011, 127). Jure Gantar's sociological analysis of audience laughter comes to a similar conclusion in that an implicit agreement within the theatrical context may be arbitrary, but it is powerful: "Theatrical communication thus depends on the reception of messages as structured from transmittable signs whose universal acceptance is a matter of the conventional agreement between the performers and the spectators, and whose relation to their reference — the staged world — may be purely arbitrary" (1994, 146).
6. The review quoted here was formerly available at <http://reviewsbyrobyn.blogspot.com/>. An October 2017 entry announced the end of *Reviews by Robyn*: "Thanks for reading and following my blog, but as of December 1st 2017 I've decided to call it a day and will be deleting the account. It's been a pleasure reviewing the Festival these past years!"
7. Gale Jefferson makes this point in "Notes on Laughter in the Pursuit of Intimacy," as quoted in Broth (2011, 120).
8. In his study of what he calls "British Theatre Hegemony," Douglas Fowler underscores the ideology on which arguments of universality and access hinge: "A select group of cultural custodians are making work based on intuitive assumptions (where Shakespeare 'doesn't feel comprehensible') that determine in advance what audiences can and cannot cope with" (2014, 213).

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