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Shakespeare, Social Media, and the Digital Public Sphere:

Such Tweet Sorrow and *A Midsummer Night's Dreaming*

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Keywords: Digital**,** Performance**,** *Midsummer Night's Dream, Romeo and Juliet*, Royal Shakespeare Company, Public Sphere, Social Media

Abstract: *How has the expansion of digital culture in the twenty-first century influenced the performance of Shakespeare's plays in and for the public sphere? This article looks at two social media adaptations produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company in the last decade:* Such Tweet Sorrow *(2010), a version of* Romeo and Juliet *performed for five weeks on Twitter, and* A Midsummer Night's Dreaming *(2013), a month-long, hybrid staging of* A Midsummer Night's Dream *using Google+. Drawing on digital records, practitioner interviews, and, above all, audience members' interactive responses to the projects, this article explores how these social media re-imaginings of Shakespeare's plays foreground questions of time, presence, participation, and ethics in the theatre as it evolves within an ever-widening digital and public sphere.*

"OK so… how does this work?" —*@julietcap16*

In the opening lines of *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook famously boils the art of theatre-making down to the most basic essentials: "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (9). A space, an actor, an audience—someone does something while someone else watches, and theatre is born. One of the fundamental principles of Brook's treatise, "a holy text" according to some, is that theatre can happen anywhere (see Lan). It is not a function of a certain kind of architectural space, but of an elemental exchange taking place between people.

Such an account highlights the inherently social, relational, and public nature of theatrical experience: it is something that happens with, through, for, and because of others. And yet theatre

as an art form has, arguably, been reluctant at times to explore the possibilities of digital connectivity, that most social, relational, and public of phenomena in twenty-first-century life.[1] Perhaps because scholars, practitioners, and audiences alike have so often emphasised the fundamental necessity of physical co-presence in the creation of live theatrical experience, the idea that this ancient art form might find new life on the virtual stage of the world wide web has struggled for acceptance among some.[2] This is not to say that there haven't been attempts to investigate what online theatre might look like, or that a number of people haven't observed the potential affinities between digitised, plugged-in life and dramatic performance. As early as 1991, Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theatre* highlighted the relationship between the interactive, representational worlds created by theatre and those evoked through computer programmes and interfaces. More recently, Christina Papagiannouli's *Political Cyberformance* (2016) has investigated how digital culture and collaborative tools might energise politically engaged, grassroots theatrical work. Still, many theatre enthusiasts—perhaps especially within the world of more classical, text-driven Shakespearean drama—have remained ambivalent about the creative potential of digital connectivity. If it's true that theatrical performance often remains "so analog", as William Worthen has playfully suggested (165), then it is worth asking ourselves the question: why?

This article explores what happens when theatre enters "the very public space of the Internet" (Hutcheon/O'Flynn 192) by looking at two high-profile examples of professionally scripted, acted, and, in a sense, "staged" social media adaptations of Shakespeare: *Such Tweet Sorrow* (2010) and *A Midsummer Night's Dreaming* (2013). Co-produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company, these projects probed the limits of theatrical experience by moving dramatic character and action into the networked world of social media communication and seeing what this new stage could offer. *Such Tweet Sorrow*, developed in collaboration with the digital design company Mudlark, used Twitter to tell the story of *Romeo and Juliet* over the course of five weeks from April to May 2010. Modernised language and contexts replaced Shakespeare's original poetry and settings, and audience members interacted online with the seven actors performing the principal roles from different Twitter accounts. *A Midsummer Night's Dreaming* at once expanded this creative focus while also taking a step back from complete digital immersion. Produced with the help of Google Creative Lab and performed over three days during the June 2013 midsummer weekend, it combined a live, "real-time" performance of the play in Stratford-upon-Avon with an online, interactive exploration of peripheral and entirely new characters on the digital platform Google+.

This article considers what such collaborative experiments in digital theatre-making might mean for the future of Shakespearean performance, and more specifically for its publics. While there is no question that projects like *Such Tweet Sorrow* and *A Midsummer Night's Dreaming* have the ability

to reach wider and more diverse audiences than most traditional stage performances, what is less clear is the kinds of creative experiences such encounters produce: as we will see, their narratives are by no means predestined. In their adoption of internet idioms and online forms of representation, these projects have incurred charges of dumbing-down or thinning out Shakespeare's language, characters, and stories. At the same time, in their parallel exploration of digital modes of interaction, they have troubled conventional understandings of the boundaries between stage and audience, of performance and "real" life. Looking more closely at these social media adaptations reveals several insights into what digital culture can do for theatre and indeed for Shakespeare: it can reframe our understanding of critical appraisal and audience authority, provide new ways into dramatic characterisation, highlight the pleasures of shared emotion and experience, and encourage us to explore the possibilities of non-linear story-telling. Perhaps most importantly, it can challenge us to think harder about theatre's ethical relationship to society and the audience's role in such matters, especially as the fictional looks more and more like the real. In focusing our attention on how social media performance might work, these productions push us to consider how the very nature of performance itself might be changing—both on-stage and off-—as Shakespeare and his publics evolve in response to an increasingly digital world.

"To be a public spectacle to all": audiences and exposure

In writings on theatre and the public sphere, hopes and visions for the power of digital connectivity have often been high. For John Muse, the inherent "staginess" of social media platforms like Twitter is "laying the groundwork for a new theatrical avant-garde that is less centralised, less elite, and less invested than their predecessors" (53, 56). Christopher Balme has gone further, suggesting that creative uses of digital technology could help re-energise and re-politicise an increasingly esoteric and inward-looking theatrical culture: "Today, the normal performance fare, no matter how innovative, taboo-breaking or transgressive, has little engagement with the public sphere … The darkened auditorium has become to all intents and purposes a private space" (3). Because of the internet, he argues, the very phrase "public sphere" has "even more currency" than it did when Jürgen Habermas first introduced it in the 1960s. Thinking seriously about the power of online culture, he suggests, may very well be one of the "more radical step[s]" needed to reengage theatre-making with a broad, diverse, and vibrant public audience (3, 6).

Such Tweet Sorrow and *A Midsummer Night's Dreaming* both used social media to take the performance of Shakespeare into the digital public sphere, but they did so in their own distinctive ways. As Maurizio Calbi and Stephen O'Neill have reminded us, "social media Shakespeares are a

convenient collective for particular, platform-specific iterations of Shakespeare" —or, to put it another way, different social media enable different kinds of experiments with Shakespeare, and as such engage different kinds of publics. For *Such Tweet Sorrow*, the relatively young micro-blogging site Twitter was the chosen platform. Just four years old in 2010, Twitter had attracted considerable exposure for its growing membership, its celebrity users, and its popularisation of the hashtag, but it had yet to achieve the broader following and more serious profile that would come in 2011 after its precipitating role in the events of the Arab Spring (see Beaumont; Khondker). What was notable about the platform in these early years was that it was more open and public than a site like Facebook, based as the latter is on existing, "real-life" social connections, and that it was, like most new social media sites, primarily adopted by teenagers and young adults. Fourteen percent of 18-29-year-old American internet users were on it, in contrast to just 7 percent of 30-49-year-olds, the next largest user group (see Smith).

In its content as well as its form, *Such Tweet Sorrow* actively courted this younger demographic, transposing the story of *Romeo and Juliet* to modern Britain and distilling its cast down to seven speaking parts, each with its own Twitter profile. Five were essentially modernised copies of Shakespeare's original characters—@romeo_mo, @julietcap16, @mercuteio, @Tybalt_Cap, and @LaurenceFriar—while the other two were amalgamated or original figures. @Jess_nurse encompassed the part of Juliet's nurse, but in this version became her older sister, while the completely new @jago_klepto channelled aspects of *Othello*'s Iago and served as a sinister commentator on the story's action. (Figure 1) Outside of the dramatic frame, the project's official Twitter handle, @Such_Tweet, provided intermittent plot summaries, prompts to the audience, and guidance for the confused. During the first week of April, Jago slowly inaugurated the project with a few confrontational tweets to the audience—"You guys tweet too much like u don't have a life or sumthing" (7 April, 12.03pm); "U people need to rt more and talk to strangers" (8 April, 12.05pm)—and @Such_Tweet announced that "the map of Not-Verona" was "tak[ing] shape" (8 April, 12.45pm).[3] Mercutio joined in on this preshow of sorts with a photo of his eye and the message, "I am watching you" (10 April, 5.42pm), and then, on the morning of April 11th, the digital curtain finally rose on Jess as she trained for the London Marathon: "Empty streets. I love Sunday mornings. Time to pound some pavement!" (9.07am)

Figure 1. The Such Tweet Sorrow *digital stage (screenshot).*

It only takes a few tweets to get a good sense of the pitch and tone of this production, as well as the extent of its adaptation: text-speak abounded, jeers to other characters and audience members were commonplace, and mundane narration of daily activities filled the digital stage. As Calbi has observed, while Shakespeare's language did surface in the production, it always remained at the fringes, haunting the project like a spectre (Calbi 137-207). The new terms of reference were decidedly youthful, pop-culture-oriented, and frequently off-colour. Juliet was introduced as a *Twilight*-obsessed, image-conscious fifteen-year-old girl whose room sported 'a LIFE SIZE cardboard cutout" of Robert Pattinson—"the love of my life!!" (11 April, 9.02pm), while the decidedly less innocent Mercutio joked about hangovers, oral sex, and masturbation: "Big breasted nympho's [*sic*] you've let me down – date with my right hand it is then (or maybe the left)" (11 April, 12.29pm). By the time the Xbox-addicted Romeo appeared four days later, the @Such_Tweet account had already fielded a number of complaints about the particular flavour of this online adaptation. Responses to them included, "it is still warming up – give it a chance" (12 April, 9.02pm), "condescend to stay with us for a few days before you judge" (13 April, 11.01am), and "don't think we ever claim it IS Shakespeare … hope we can soothe your doubts over time (or outrage you entirely)" (13 April, 11.19am, 11.20am).

One month and roughly 4,000 tweets later, most of the production's higher-profile critics did end up veering towards major, if not quite complete, indignation. *The Guardian*'s Charlotte Higgins felt that the project showcased the worst of what Twitter had to offer, namely, "persons of little wit and scant information clogging up your life with a constant stream of misspelt inanity". Jake Orr of *A Younger Theatre*, a site dedicated to promoting the voices of young critics, was even more irate. "There is something in the air that resembles the stench of manure being spread across the fields … [It] comes in the form of Mudlurk [*sic*] and The RSC with their joint project Such Tweet Sorrows [*sic*]". Other blogger-audience members critiqued the gender politics and crass sexuality depicted in the production, along with the volume of content and the diffuse way in which it was delivered.[4] Based on these reviews alone, it would seem that the project failed to unearth untapped dramatic potential in its social media stage.

What such a conclusion overlooks, however, is the wider and less centralised public response that the production received from its many online fans. Over the course of *Such Tweet Sorrow*'s run, audience members posted around 6,000 tweets using the production's official hashtag, #suchtweet, and also generated their own calling card, #teamchorus. These tweets included interactions with the production's characters, commentary on its storyline, and conversations with one another. A remarkable performance of audience emerged alongside this unusual performance of Shakespeare, and through it a clear camaraderie developed between many of the show's most ardent followers. "It feels so weird… It's close to heartbroken… We're #suchtweet's orphans" (15 May, 5.41am), one bereft fan posted the day after the production ended, while another consoled herself by highlighting the relationships that remained: "Adjusting to the new long-term shape of my Twitter feed: without #suchtweet but with lots of new friends" (15 May, 10.11am).[5] Others focused on the emotional power that they found in the production, and the way it drew them into Shakespeare's drama: "Even though I have read the story a million times, #suchtweet broke my heart in a whole new way" (14 May, 6.36pm); 'sad that #suchtweet is over – found conclusion really quite moving' (15 May, 6.00pm). Though *Such Tweet Sorrow* was not to all tastes, a closer look at its wider public response shows that it clearly sparked the imaginations of many of its online spectators.

In total this public amounted to more than 140,000 people, a sizable audience for any five-week run, and in that sense it certainly achieved at least one of the RSC's aims: to "reach audiences who can't come to Stratford" (see Marlow; Sahota). Additional market research carried out after the production finished suggested that it had engaged "a much younger, more ethnically diverse and less upmarket audience" than was typically the case at the RSC (Rokison 4). One fan who used a wheelchair blogged about how *Such Tweet Sorrow* made participating in theatre more possible for her: "it saved me from having to deal with practical access issues in and around Stratford … the

beauty of Twitter is that if you need to sleep or medicate or stretch or rest or throw up, all of the play is right there waiting for you to catch up on when you come back" (see "Batsgirl"). Despite criticism from its more established theatre reviewers, for many audience members the project was an intriguing and welcome endeavour. It engaged a broader audience than the publicly funded RSC usually attracts, and it eventually won a Royal Television Society Award for Digital Innovation for its efforts.

Even so, when the RSC decided three years later to embark on *A Midsummer Night's Dreaming*, significant changes were made to this digital production's design and scope. This was due at least in part to the chosen social media platform: this time the very new Google+ would be used and Google Creative Lab would serve as the project's co-producer. In the summer of 2013, Google+ was just two years old and the central component in Google's plan to claw back some of the social media market from Facebook. Featuring a mix of text, video, and photos, as well as customisable "circles" that allowed users to tailor how their posts were shared with their contacts, Google+ was "a response to … the emergence of the social web" and marketed as "a one-stop shop for all the ways we interact with each other" (see Denning; Pierce). As a platform for artistic performance it had capabilities that potentially went far beyond Twitter in 2010, but how those features worked in practice still remained unknown.

A Midsummer Night's Dreaming—nicknamed #Dream40, since it was the RSC's fortieth production of the play—was one way of testing such questions. In an interview published the week before the show began, Google's Tea Uglow described how #Dream40 was using "Google+ as a platform for immersive narrative" and "pushing [it] to fascinating new places" ("Epilogue"). By the time of the interview, interaction on the Google+ stage was already well underway. Although the production didn't officially begin until Friday, 22 June, the audience-generated preshow kicked off at the start of the month. Here followers of the project were encouraged to share *Dream*-related memes, favourite quotes from the play, and music suggestions for its lovelorn characters, all of which tessellated onto Google+ like a quirky patchwork quilt.[6] (Figure 2) In this way, the audience interaction and camaraderie that emerged from *Such Tweet Sorrow* became the starting point for #Dream40: the production, at least in its early stages, was its public. What this all led to, however, was something rather different. Unlike *Such Tweet Sorrow*, in which the performance played out entirely online, *A Midsummer Night's Dreaming* opted for something altogether more hybrid. For three days over the midsummer weekend, fourteen actors performed *Dream* live and in-person at the RSC in Stratford-upon-Avon in a series of small, site-specific performances that mimicked the real-time world of the play. On Friday evening the cast presented Act One to a few members of RSC staff, who witnessed the lovers preparing to flee to Athens, and then at 2am on Sunday, 23 June—in the middle of the

shortest night of the year—a small public audience assembled in the RSC's Ashcroft Room to watch the woodland antics of Acts Two, Three, and Four. As the performance finished two hours later, the sun outside gently rose, heralding the morning light that moves Shakespeare's comedy into its final act. That afternoon, the RSC invited members of the public to participate in wedding-themed arts and crafts outside as they prepared for the royal nuptials of Theseus and Hippolyta, and finally in the evening the actors gathered outdoors to perform Act Five for an open audience.

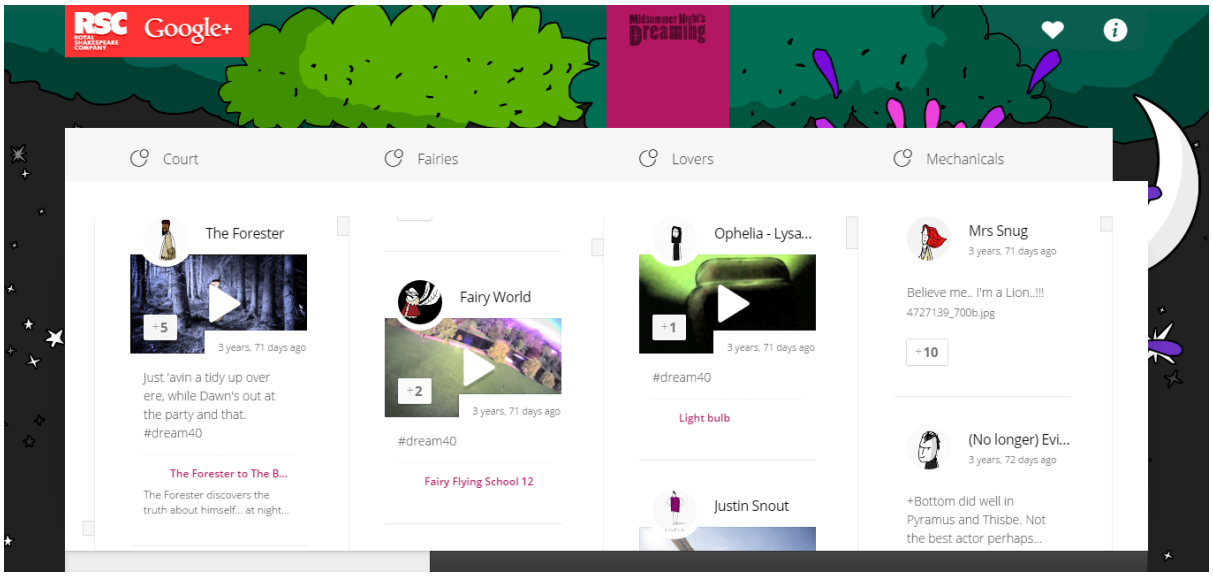

Figure 2. The Midsummer Night's Dreaming *digital stage (screenshot).*

So where was the digital in all this? For those in Stratford following the free live performances, the only certain sign of it was the encouragement director Greg Doran gave to audiences to photograph and video the action that played out before them and to upload this material to the Google+ platform. Shortly after, Alexandra Gilbreath as Titania gestured to an audience member's iPad as she spoke of the "trifles" and "rich … merchandise" that she and her Indian votaress joyously imagined together, but otherwise the production was decidedly low-tech, employing only the most basic costumes, music, and props. (Figure 3) For those not in Stratford, however, or for those splitting their attention between the on-site and online stages, a whole other world of performance could be found by visiting the production's Google+ pages. Here newly created characters from *Dream* commented plentifully on the play's main action and readied themselves for the wedding celebrations expected at the end. Bottom's mum bragged about her son's talents and offered followers acting advice ("Morning dears! Check out my latest Acting for Amateurs podcast", 22 June); Mrs Snug prepared her husband's lion costume and shared knitting patterns ("Never have

Athenian garments looked quite like this! LOL!", 23 June); and *The Knight's Herald* newspaper posted tabloid-style headlines about the play's more salacious proceedings ("Who does LYSANDER love now: HERMIA, HELENA or HIMSELF?", 23 June).[7] Even more fanciful characters appeared once the action moved into the woods: a bear shared videos of himself dancing amongst the trees, the moon waxed lyrical on love, and a pair of enchanted beagles debated opposing political views. Around twenty-five new characters joined the play through this digital world, and audience members were encouraged to interact with them and share their own dream-like, festive posts on the online stage. In the end, roughly 3,000 pieces of new content were created by these new characters and the audience, amounting to about one piece every five minutes (Uglow "Epilogue").

Figure 3. 3.51am in the Ashcroft Room: (from bottom left) Demetrius (Simon Manyonda), Puck (Mark Hadfield), Bottom (Joe Dixon), Titania (Alexandra Gilbreath), and Oberon (Peter de Jersey) (photo by Erin Sullivan).

Several aspects of the #Dream40 design directly addressed critical feedback that had been received after *Such Tweet Sorrow*: Shakespeare's original language stayed at the core of the project, its

timeline was kept to three days rather than lasting several weeks, and on the whole its content remained family-friendly. Nevertheless, the production still encountered its fair share of criticism. Dominic Cavendish of *The Telegraph* gave it two out of five stars, complaining that it was "Very much a case of 'you had to be there'" at the live performances in Stratford and describing the Google+ site as "a near-constant stream of tittle-tattle" that left him "Bard rigid and wondering what the Puck was going on". Other audience members also expressed confusion about how the production worked, both in terms of the amount of content coming to them through Google+ and the relationship between the online and on-site stages. "Dipped in but didn't stay", *Guardian* critic Andrew Dickson tweeted, while Peter Kirwan longed for more connection between the live performance and the digital world: "My overall impression of the virtual stage was one of an inward-looking chaos", he concluded, and many of his fellow audience members clearly agreed.[8]

As with *Such Tweet Sorrow*, however, there is another side to this story of digital reception. While #Dream40 did not inspire quite the same cult-like following as *Such Tweet*, it did engage a broad cross-section of audience members who praised its ingenuity and sense of fun. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents to the RSC's audience feedback survey indicated that they thought the production was "good", "very good", or "excellent", and in the long-form comments several praised its "brilliantly warm and welcoming" Google+ community and the way it allowed its audience "to feel involved rather than simply be a bystander" in this experiment in "social storytelling".[9] Thirty-one percent of respondents were based outside of the UK, in contrast to just 5 percent of traditional audiences at the RSC that year, and 60 percent were between the ages of 16-44, as opposed to 32 percent on-site. In addition to these more diverse demographics, the total numbers participating in some way in the production were impressive: it attracted 110,000 unique visitors over the long weekend, and its content reportedly featured in a staggering 25 million Twitter feeds (Uglow "Epilogue"). Once again the RSC won accolades for its work, this time taking home two Lovie digital awards in the category of experimentation and innovation.

Still, we might ask what exactly all these numbers mean in terms of theatrical engagement and spectatorship? While it is safe to assume that most audiences attending a traditional stage production will come and stay for the entire show, those participating in digital productions like *Such Tweet Sorrow* and *A Midsummer Night's Dreaming* were much more likely to tune in for just a small part of it. "Attending" such productions typically involves interacting with them in some way, sometimes for as little as a minute or two, and then returning to everyday routines. In this sense, "theatrical experience" in the realm of social media becomes less about sustained, engrossing absorption in an alternative world and more about dipping in and out of a playful space that is layered onto normal daily life. The kind of spectatorship produced is much more incidental and even

distracted—perhaps a sign of our increasingly time-poor "attention economy" (see Lanham)—and for this reason some critics have questioned if they can really be thought of as theatre. "Compared with the smells and the textures and the sounds and the thingness-es of the [performance] studio," John Wyver wrote in a piece partly inspired by #Dream40, "the digital world was pale and distant. Drama in the real world came to seem seductive in a way that appeared beyond drama in digital space." ("Digital Disillusion")

Wyver is certainly right in pointing out that the experience of watching theatre through social media lacks the sense of presence, materiality, and arguably also substance that we have come to expect from the stage. While some of *Such Tweet Sorrow*'s audiences did emphasise the absorption and even addiction that they experienced as they followed the project, the fact that it lasted five weeks necessarily meant that how they engaged with it could never be characterised as uninterrupted immersion. There are ways in which the project attempted to subvert this: on the night of Juliet's sixteenth birthday party, the modernised equivalent of Capulet's ball, audience members were encouraged to press play at the same time on a special Spotify playlist, and thus experience the party together in fictionalised real time. The fact that it took place on April 23rd, Shakespeare's own special day, added to the sense of shared occasion, and producers sought to expand on this in *A Midsummer Night's Dreaming* by timing the production to coincide with the summer solstice and restricting its overall playing time to one festive, community-oriented weekend.

Such measures show how it is possible to bring people together and create a sense of shared time in online performance, but it's also worth thinking about the ways in which these productions failed to conform to such expectations while still, potentially, being theatrical. As both Christopher Balme and Dennis Kennedy have reminded us, "the model of spectatorship we implicitly assume [to be correct for the theatre] (more or less intense, corporeally immobilized concentration in a darkened auditorium) is a recent modernist invention – not much older than a century or so"' (Balme 13; Kennedy 12). Furthermore, Balme suggests that this naturalised but by no means "natural" mode of spectatorship "is seldom conducive to social or political debate", and as such works against the development of a meaningful relationship between theatre and a vibrant public sphere. It is possible, therefore, that what social media theatre may lack in terms of facilitating "intensified absorptive attention", it might gain in terms of generating new possibilities for audience agency, experience, and debate (13). With this in mind, the second half of this article considers the kinds of spectatorship *Such Tweet Sorrow* and *A Midsummer Night's Dreaming* produced amongst their audiences, and the way such behaviour helps shed light on what it means to be a part of, and to perform in, a digital public sphere.

"This wide and universal theatre": performance and digital life

Since the early days of social media, digital theorists have pointed out how intrinsic the idea of theatrical performance is to the way this mode of communication works. If all forms of identity are performed, as Erving Goffman argued so influentially in the mid-twentieth century, then the presentation of one's self online is certainly no exception.[10] In fact, the opportunities for controlling and curating information that come with social media can intensify the deliberateness of this kind of performance. According to media studies scholar Erika Pearson, such "platforms provide areas which are disembodied, mediated and controllable, and through which alternate performances can be displayed to others … Users manipulate these communicative codes, with varying degrees of skill and dexterity, to create not only online selves, but also to create the staging and setting in which these selves exist". The level of practice and care that frequently goes into such performances of self online has led Patrick Lonergan to suggest that they bear more than passing resemblance to Richard Schechner's concept of theatre as "twice-behaved behaviour", or the thing that "never [happens] for the first time" (Lonergan 28; Schechner 36). Art is present on both the theatrical and the social media stage, shaping what's on show.

Both *Such Tweet Sorrow* and *A Midsummer Night's Dreaming* playfully explored these realities in their performance of Shakespeare for the digital sphere. Structurally speaking, each project was at its heart an assemblage of individual social media profiles, which meant that character and characterisation were foregrounded even more than they might be in a traditional stage production. Indeed, in addition to listening to different characters deliver their lines on the aggregated social media stages as the dramas unfolded, audience members could also explore characters' personal profiles in their own time and engage with a performance of digital identity that extended beyond the confines of the script. Juliet provides a particularly rich example from the cast of *Such Tweet Sorrow*: despite the fact that several of the project's fans protested that her character was irritating, and thus that she was undeserving of Romeo's affections, Juliet eventually amassed around 6,000 followers—nearly 2,000 more than any other character—and was in this sense the production's most popular figure. Perhaps this was because her online characterisation was especially strong. With 681 tweets, she ended up having the most lines in the play, and she used them to explore ideas and feelings that went beyond the necessities of plot. In addition to pledging her love for *Twilight*—and following Twitter accounts related to it, of course—she also voiced feelings of self-loathing and doubt that could be uncomfortable to read, but that were not unrealistic in the context of many fifteen-year-old girls' lives. "I so wish I could find my own Edward Cullen! I'm so minging and fat and

ugly… :(I have no chance!" (12 April, 7.46pm), she tweeted early in the project, and as her birthday party approached she highlighted the unexpected benefits of its theme: "A masked ball!! If you have like… A bad skin day or… Like… Have no confidence in front of the boys it's ok cz no-one will know it's you" (20 April, 4.05pm).

Juliet's confessional streak showed itself even more strongly in the YouTube videos she shared with her followers. Though she was not the only character to use this medium—Mercutio also uploaded brief snippets of footage from his exploits with Romeo—she was alone in using an earnest, direct-to-camera format for her postings. In these vlog-style videos she took her followers on a tour of her bedroom, spoke about her feelings on the tenth anniversary of her mother's death (from a car accident), and performed emotional songs that she had written herself. (Figure 4) Her embodied presence in these videos added a further level of intimacy and directness to her performance, and thus to her character: in seeing Juliet's face and hearing her voice, audiences bore witness to the fact that she was indeed a "real" young woman, and not just a scriptwriter posting tweets to a timeline. A persistent desire for bodily co-presence, and the sense of authenticity that comes with it, is perhaps one reason why her videos proved so popular both during the production and after it. The video of her first song, posted in the second week of the project, has to date received over 9,000 hits and more than fifty comments, with many people assuming that she is a real person and engaging with her song beyond the frame of *Such Tweet*. One example from 2012 reads, "Wow. You're actually really good! Don't ask why I did this but I wrote in 'rubbish singer' XD lol and it came up with this, why?!;!?" Here the commenter's own search for the keyword "rubbish" matched with the description Juliet had written for her video on YouTube: "Ok so this might be a bit rubbish… I have a horrid cold and… it's only in its 1st draft but… I hope you enjoy it… :)". In this instance, we can see how her online performance of emotionality and self-doubt becomes a point of connection and even an object of desire for her audiences, both within *Such Tweet* and beyond. Through such confessional displays, Juliet actively involves spectators in her own characterisation and prompts us to think more deeply about how identity—both individual and shared—is constantly being constructed online.

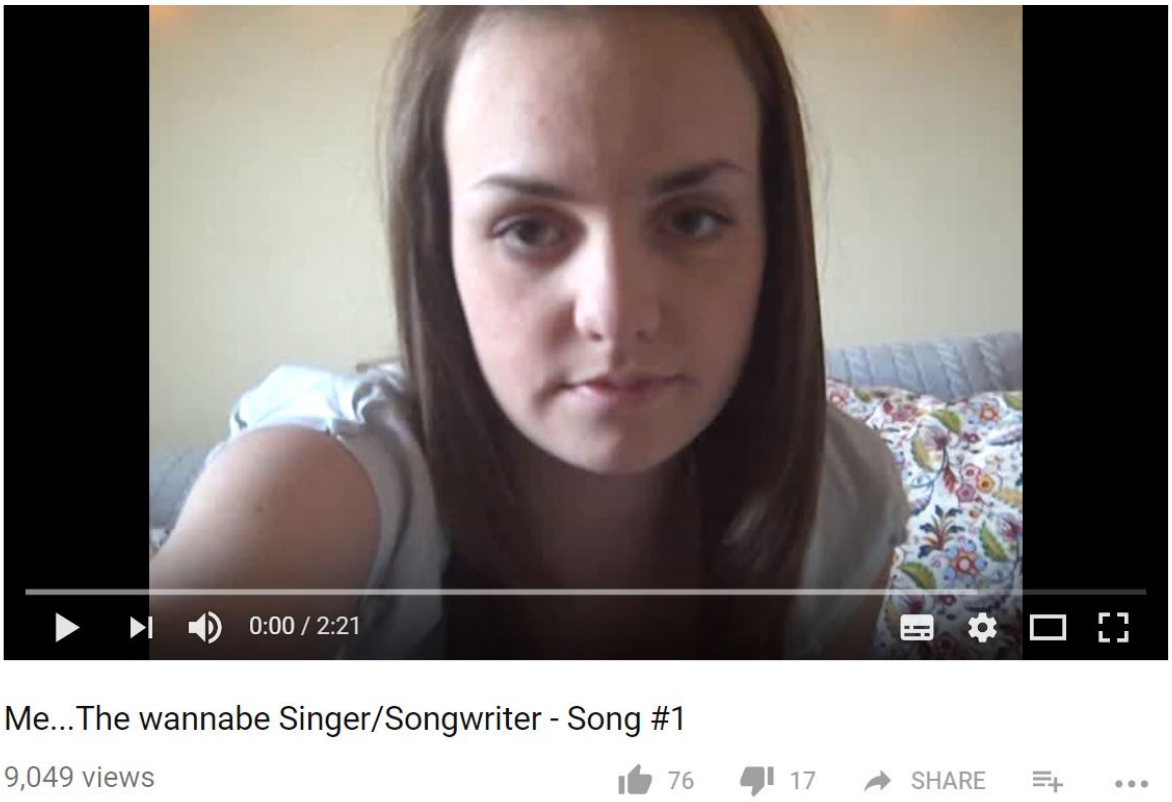

Figure 4. Juliet's YouTube channel (screenshot).

#Dream40 offered audiences similar displays of earnest self-presentation through characters like Mrs Snug, who posted pictures of her sewing projects and shared candid snaps of her husband (the actor from the live production) dressed up in her lion costume for the Sunday festivities. More unusual, and perhaps more interesting in terms of internet behaviour, were the profiles that veered off-piste into more fanciful and even surreal territory. Take, for instance, the cartoon dancing bear, whose "About" statement on his Google+ profile read, "I love to be free, to be in the wood and to dance dance dance". During the project the Bear posted twenty-eight pieces of content to his profile, including haikus about the serene beauty of the woods, a cartoon-strip meme called #wrongplaybear in which he quoted Shakespeare plays other than *Dream*, some playful photos and videos of real brown bears doing funny things, and, most memorably, a series of five-second videos in which he danced to pulsing electronica. (Figure 5) The point of the Bear was that there was no point: like so many things that we find and share on the internet, the Bear offered a mix of the cute, the silly, the ridiculous, and the bizarre. In this sense, his profile was not so much a performance of individual identity as it was a performance of collective social media culture. It showcased the kinds of delightfully meaningless digital oddities that people exchange every day online and that become sites of shared amusement and even joy. Playful, unfettered sociability takes priority over careful,

analytical engagement: the Bear's contribution to the world of the *Dream* is much more about communal affect than it is about critical understanding.

Figure 5. The dancing Bear (screenshot, artwork by The Brothers McLeod).

In their emphasis on whimsy and small-scale spectacle, #Dream40 profiles like the Bear's seem to exemplify a peculiarly digital form of postdramatic theatre, in which visual, sensory modes of experience—or "simultaneous and multi-perspectival form[s] of perceiving" (Lehmann 16)—come before drama and plot. The digital spectator is immersed in a world of stimulating, interchangeable objects that invite lively interaction rather than sequenced interpretation. And yet, many of these profiles did eventually yield story-based surprises, though not ones that many spectators would have been able to perceive during the original performance itself. Four of the Bear's posts pointed enigmatically to another character, the Forester, hinting at some sort of deeper connection. On Sunday morning, for instance, after the lovers' night-time antics in the woods, he wrote: "And so once again I bid farewell to fair +Phoebe - The Moon and lie down to sleep through the hot Athenian Day. I wonder if I will have strange dreams again… dreams as though I live inside another body, a human body and walk amongst the town as something like … +The Forester? #dream40 #sleep

#transformation". Later that day, he posted a picture of the Forester with a bear-shaped shadow (Figure 6), and then on Monday—a day after the project had officially finished—both he and the Forester shared videos suggesting that they were in fact two halves of the same character: "I am at one with myself!", the Bear exclaimed, "I am both Bear and +The Forester!" In such instances the metamorphoses at work in Shakespeare's original text resurfaced and multiplied across Google+'s digital dreamscape.

Figure 6. The Bear and the Forester metamorphose (screenshot, artwork by The Brothers McLeod).

Few audience members, if any, would have been able to pick up on the subtle clues that led towards this revelation without repeat viewings. Indeed, it is notable that neither the Bear nor the Forester's final posts about their shared identity attracted any audience comments. For most people watching the online production on one of its aggregate feeds—either the dedicated Google+ community page or the specially made #Dream40 site—pieces of content from all of the project's profiles, plus the audience, arrived every few minutes, all day long. Though the individual profile pages offered diversions that spectators could explore in detail, the project's primary mode of delivery was collective and chorus-like, with all voices singing at once. This is likely why Kirwan found #Dream40 so chaotic, as well as why Pascale Aebischer concluded that the production's "most engaged spectators are those who pay little attention to the RSC's live performance and who enter the

production's digital environment as Puck-like auditor-actors on a *derive"* (102). Not only does the digital keep performing after the live event has finished, but it performs in far less linear and prescribed ways, repaying the pains of spectators who unpick its byzantine pathways and travel through and beyond the Shakespearean text. In the digital sphere, both story and audience have the potential to spiral out in all directions, creating a series of coexisting performance*s* rather than a single, definitive enactment.

This lateral, layered type of storytelling characterised the structure of both *Such Tweet Sorrow* and *A Midsummer Night's Dreaming*, and might even be seen as the defining hallmark of social media performance more generally. It is why both productions came across as confusing at times, and also why the RSC and its collaborators chose to create aggregate project timelines that organised their contents in a more linear fashion. Here audiences could attempt to read the productions from start to finish, and, in the case of #Dream40, a few months later they could access a two-hour multimedia track combining audio from the live production with images and text from the digital one. Order of some sort was imposed on the chaos, making a more traditional experience of narrative drama possible. But as useful as such organising principles can be, they also belie the constant impulse towards distributed, multidirectional experience that underpins not only these projects but also the way online, networked life works. One of the features that many *Such Tweet* followers particularly appreciated was the way the production travelled across platforms and, in doing so, blurred the division between fictional and real life. The project's Wikipedia page, very possibly written by its fans, likens it to Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds* and notes that "the variety of the media usage made it easier for the followers to connect to the characters … [It gave] the impression they're following somebody's real-life story". In addition to the embodied "realness" of Juliet in her YouTube videos, characters directly interacted with audience members on Twitter and Romeo invited them to play *Call of Duty* by searching for his Xbox gamertag "ObeRomeoKenobi". Amidst these decidedly social interactions, the production also included topical references to the UK general election on 6 May, to the major flight disruptions caused by a volcanic eruption in Iceland in mid-April, and to several football matches taking place during the production's run. It constantly strove to be in the moment, allowing actors to improvise their lines in a way that embedded their characters' experiences into the real and shared world of the digital public sphere.

The producers of #Dream40 built on *Such Tweet* by putting this model of mixed, hybrid realities at the core of their project. It was the rationale for simultaneous live and digital performances, which were intended to interact with one another a bit more than they perhaps actually did, and for the idea of a hotly anticipated royal wedding—reminiscent of the 2011 marriage of Prince William and Kate Middleton—that informed many of the project's opportunities for audience participation.

Reflecting on the inspiration behind the project, Tea Uglow wrote about how life today "is fragmented, glimpsed, experienced and amplified through [social media] sharing … big news events—riots, bombings, royal weddings—all become subject to this anarchic, multi-dimensional, multi-authored storytelling" ("Dreaming"). #Dream40 attempted to mirror the abundant and disjointed nature of online debate, through both its crowd-sourced audience contributions and its new Google+ characters, and in this aim it certainly succeeded. Its main challenge, however, was in finding points at which those individual voices and stories could come back together and create meaningful connections between both audiences and actors and the digital and the live. As the project got going, the sheer volume of content meant that many of the audience's attempts at interaction with the online characters went unacknowledged, and that the on-site production in Stratford also started to take on its own, separate identity, functioning more as a series of intimate chamber performances than the linchpin in a spiralling digital experiment. Though an implicit aim was to fuse the on-site and the online in a way that illustrated the fallacy of "digital dualism"—that is, "the belief that the on and offline are largely separate and distinct"—at times the project ended up reiterating it (Techopedia; Jurgenson). With minimal interaction between the pared-down, site- and time-specific scenes from the live production and the expansive, always-unfolding kind of storytelling on the Google+ platform, the "real" and the digital worlds of #Dream40 could feel very distant from one another.

In *Such Tweet Sorrow*, the smaller cast of characters meant that the interconnections between them were easier to follow, but problems still arose concerning the relationship between the fictional frame and the wider world around it. Here the online and off-line fused more seamlessly, offering a strong refutation of digital dualist thinking, but in its blurring of "virtual" and "real" life it raised new questions about the ethical risks of such forms of performance. As the actors in the production became more life-like, and the fictional frame around their performance less visible, their sometimes rowdy behaviour and especially their direct interaction with audience members took a more troubling turn. Mercutio was at the centre of much of this activity, flirting with female audience members and asking if they "wanted to hook up some time" (12 April, 1.53pm), while also commenting about his off-stage sexual exploits: "that girl was nasty last night … Back out Tuesday night for more drunken disorderly" (11 April, 5.52pm); "Ginger Minger still in my bed … Well, if she's gonna stay, might as well make the most of it!" (14 April, 9.51am, 11.01am). The morning after Juliet's party, during which she and Romeo met and slept together, Mercutio again took to Twitter to comment: "So @romeo_mo is not divulging info from last night because he shagged one of the 15 year olds – jailbait you dirty man" (24 April, 8.32pm). The point of such laddish tweets was to establish a modern-day equivalent for the graphic puns and sexual language that are clearly present

in Shakespeare's original text, particularly in the scenes between Mercutio, Romeo, and Benvolio (2.1, 2.4). In laying them so bare, however, and in directing them to an audience that itself very likely included the legally underaged, the production walked a fine line between being mischievously subversive and ethically problematic.

This was nowhere more evident than in Mercutio and Romeo's interactive game, #uploadthatload, in which they challenged audience members and one another to snap pictures of women's cleavage without their knowledge. Romeo and Mercutio posted several pictures themselves, spurring each other on as they did so: "@mercuteio right I know what will get you in the mood to party. A game of #uploadthatload?" (23 April, 8.43pm) While the women who featured in the several photos they shared were presumably in on the fictionalised context, the fact that they encouraged audience members to participate in the game broke the make-believe frame of *Such Tweet* and entered the very real world of online bullying and sexual harassment. The more life-like the production became, the more it moved away from the suspended ethics of fictional art and towards the codes of conduct expected, if not always realised, in the shared public sphere. Such moments of tension suggest that the more theatre moves towards unframed verisimilitude—or what Muse calls "virtual realism" (58)—the more it may become bound by the forms of social governance we insist on elsewhere in our lives.

Ethics are not the only matters that potentially need increased attention as theatre simultaneously goes digital and goes public: audience behaviour, and more specifically audience creativity, also take on new and at times challenging agency. In *Such Tweet*, the most involved audience members tried at different points in the drama to influence its narrative trajectory. In the early days of the project a profile by the name of @BenVoli0 began interacting with characters and audience members, feeding them bits of plot and anticipating the story. Two weeks before Juliet and Romeo actually met, and before Romeo had even appeared on the Twitter stage, "Ben" tweeted to Juliet, "hey babe my cuz is totally up to hang with u. Wanna team up with @mercuteio and Ben for some pre-party action?" (12 April, 11.33am) This wouldn't have been odd except for the fact that Ben wasn't part of the official cast; rather, he was an audience member who had decided to join in on the fun. A few days and many tweets later, Ben wrote to Romeo about his troubled love life, again drawing on foreknowledge of Shakespeare's original text: "you've got 2 more weeks *on* Rosaline, didn't u read the script update?" (15 April, 8.51am) Eventually the project's producers felt the need to deal with this unexpected presence by disowning it: to several confused followers, @Such_Tweet commented, "BenVolio is not part of #suchtweet – except as an extreme fanboy who knows less than he pretends – thought you'd like to know" (17 April, 12.51pm). While the project encouraged participation from its audience—including the passionate #savemercutio campaign that some of its followers would

later launch—the active, participatory nature of web culture quickly tested how far this interaction could be pushed. In the end, the project preserved a more traditional line between performers and spectators, leaving @BenVoli0 to improvise his lines solo on the vast and at times lonely expanse of the internet's digital stage.

The issue of how far the audience can go—and the extent to which "the story shall be changed"—is perhaps the most pressing question in terms of where digital, interactive theatre is headed next. As we have seen, the directors of *A Midsummer Night's Dreaming*, building on experience gained through *Such Tweet*, chose to foreground audience creativity and participation from the start, establishing a community of active "prosumers" and encouraging them to contribute throughout the production (see Kotler). Still, this audience-generated activity served more as the backdrop to #Dream40 than as the main event. It's possible that this will always be the case for theatrical productions, digital or otherwise: at some point we have to accept that the actors act, and the spectators spectate. But the unprecedented popularity in recent years of audience-oriented theatre productions such as Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, or Ryan North's crowdfunded, choose-your-own-adventure books and videogames, *To Be or Not to Be* and *Romeo and/or Juliet*, suggests that Shakespeare's twenty-first-century publics are increasingly interested in becoming a part of the world of his dramas. Of course, these immersive forms of adaptation are not interactive free-for-alls: firm artistic walls frame their creative experiences, controlling the different directions that interventions from the audience, reader, or gamer may take. But, crucially, they do rely on their publics to make that creative experience happen. Staying still in these interactive worlds isn't much of an option.

For social media Shakespeares of the future, the challenge will be to embrace the audience's desire for interactive, user-generated experience, while also maintaining artistic coherence and control. With such principles at the fore, it is possible that we will see fully realised, dynamic, and expert digital adaptations of Shakespeare that engage new and diverse theatrical publics in powerful and meaningful ways. The forms of spectatorship that such productions produce will likely differ from those we have come to expect from the twentieth century's darkened auditoriums: sustained, absorptive concentration may indeed have to give way to shorter bursts of interactive exploration. But that doesn't mean that such exchanges will necessarily be of a lower order, or indeed less time-consuming. As Emer McHugh wrote of her own experience as a #Dream40 audience member, "posting in [the Google+ community] encouraged me to be creative about what I posted, and to be creative about how I would interact with the play online … the more you put in, the more you got out of it". If the early experiments of *Such Tweet Sorrow* and *A Midsummer Night's Dreaming* are anything to go by, the most engrossing digital adaptations of Shakespeare will still demand our

attention, but in different ways than we have been used to giving it. They will take us into the world of their characters, captivate us (momentarily) with objects of shared delight, merge at times into the world that we recognise as our own, discover ethically questionable territory and hopefully navigate it with care, tell multiple stories alongside one another, and, finally, put us into conversation with one another as we try to solve a big interactive puzzle otherwise known as the text. They will certainly be public, and, if we accept Peter Brook's iconic definition, they will also be theatre—a stage, an actor, and an audience, and a new sense of possibility as to which is which.

Notes

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[1] This is a contentious claim, of course, and not without important counter-examples. But in terms of the theatre sector in general, there is empirical as well as theoretical evidence to back it up: in the UK, for instance, a three-year study by the Digital R&D Fund for the Arts revealed that while theatre organisations made ample use of digital tools in marketing, archiving, and operations, they were "significantly less likely than the [arts] sector as a whole to … create digital works connected to an exhibition or artwork (14 per cent vs. 29 per cent sector average) or create standalone digital exhibits or works of art (8 per cent vs. 23 per cent)" (2).

[2] See for instance Erika Fischer-Lichte's argument that "the specific mediality of performance consists of the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators" (38), as well as Mark Fortier's suggestion that, "In our day especially, theatre has come to stand for an intimate and largely non-technological art-making at odds with the way of technology that has come to dominate other artistic activities" (29). More recently, the playwright Ayad Akhtar has suggested that live theatre might be one of our few remaining defences against "digital dehumanization".

[3] All production tweets are quoted from Bleys Maynard's fan-generated archive, created shortly after the performance finished in 2010. Unfortunately, as of 2016 the original project website is no longer available, and the project has not been archived off-line by the RSC. I have adjusted time signatures to GMT and have lightly edited punctuation and other matters of presentation in some tweets in order to improve readability.

[4] See for instance the blog posts of Hannah Nicklin and John Wyver; the latter are no longer available online, but lengthy excerpts are quoted in Calbi.

[5] As of 2016 these comments were still publicly available on Twitter by searching the #suchtweet hashtag. I have anonymised them out of respect for the fact that they were originally written for a very different

audience than this article. For more on the ethics of using social media data in humanities research, see Fazel, 2016.

[6] As of 2016 the *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* Google+ page was still available, though in a much-reduced form. No off-line records exist in the RSC archives. Examples of early contributions to the audience-generated preshow can be seen on my own Google+ page.

[7] As with *Such Tweet Sorrow*, each character had her or his own profile page, which then linked to the project page through the #Dream40 hashtag. See for instance the Google+ page for Bottom's mum.

[8] See for instance Mathew Lowry's video review and the blogs of John Wyver and Sylvia Morris.

[9] I am grateful to the RSC for sharing the unpublished results of their survey with me.

[10] See especially Goffman's classic text, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which explores "the way in which the individual in ordinary work situations presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them" ("Preface").

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