

#lockdownshakespeare, Shakespeare ZA (Review)

BELL, Henry

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#lockdownshakespeare

Presented by **Shakespeare ZA** from various locations across South Africa, hosted at www.shakespeare.org.za/lockdown-shakespeare. Ongoing digital performance project from April 7, 2020. Produced by Chris Thurman and Buhle Ngaba. With Soyiso Ndaba (Cassius), Buhle Ngaba (Hamlet), Amanda Seome (KaMadonsela/Lady Macbeth), Oarabile Ditsele (Macbeth), Liatile Mohale (Lady Macbeth), Ashleigh Harvey (Viola), and others.

Fig. 1 Cassius (Soyiso Ndaba) [video #2](#) in *#lockdownShakespeare*. Shakespeare ZA, 2020. Screengrab.

Fig. 2 Hamlet (Buhle Ngaba) [video #9](#) in *#lockdownShakespeare*. Shakespeare ZA, 2020. Screengrab.

Fig. 3 Lady Macbeth (Liatile Mohale) [video #29](#) in *#lockdownShakespeare*. Shakespeare ZA, 2020. Screengrab.

Fig. 4 Viola (Ashleigh Harvey) [video #34](#) in *#lockdownShakespeare*. Shakespeare ZA, 2020. Screengrab.

Umtata, Eastern Cape, South Africa. Cassius (Soyiso Ndaba) finds a private moment to make his case to Brutus. Sat in the driving seat of a car, he stares dead ahead as he sets out the building blocks of his argument centered around the principle that, “I was born free as Caesar; so were you” (1.2.97). The subject of Cassius's eye-line is unknown to me as a viewer and, because of the camera angle, I cannot see Brutus. It is clear he is close to Cassius and inside the car, definitely closer than two meters apart. The tone is intimate. I am startled as Cassius's gaze shifts suddenly to Brutus. The camera remains still and Brutus out of shot but the volume and intensity of Cassius's speech has moved up several notches as he exclaims “And this man / Is now become a god.” (1.2.115-16)

Shakespeare ZA's #lockdownshakespeare project features over forty self-taped speeches from Shakespeare's works. They are full of moments such as the one described above—settings and blocking that, with the new codes of meaning to be found in relation to proximity and face-to-face contact in “lockdown,” augment the significance of the performance text.

As Susan Bennett has explored, theater audiences create meaning from the experience of performance through frames: “The outer frame consists of all those cultural elements which create and inform the theatrical event. The inner frame contains the dramatic production in a particular playing space.” (156) In the case of Ndaba's Cassius, these frames inter-penetrate each other to help me make sense of Cassius's speech in the “new normal” of the social restrictions I am experiencing in the UK whilst watching at home. The electricity of this conversation in the play has always struck me, as a reader, an audience member, and a director. But here, it crackles with double significance since not only is Cassius breaking a variety of laws as a conspirator, his very proximity to Brutus disrupts the conditions of social distancing which I, as a viewer in the UK, have become inured to over recent weeks.. With these restrictions in mind, the sheer audacity of the conspiracy within *Julius Caesar*, the individual risks that the conspirators have taken through their plans, as well as their actions, hit me with real force due to Ndaba's intelligent choice of camera angle and disciplined focus of delivery.

Cape Town, South Africa. Hamlet (Buhle Ngaba), in bed, considers the worth of continuing to live. The camera angle puts the audience in bed next to her. Her face takes up most of the frame, her voice as hushed as you'd expect if someone was speaking to themselves or someone lying next to them. “To be, or not to be, that is the question.” (3.1.56)

Like Ndaba's Cassius, the significance of eye-line is enormous. Ngaba's gaze is slightly off-camera for the opening of the soliloquy but, for a brief moment, her look is

directly at me: “’tis a consummation / Devoutly to be wish’d.” (3.1. 64-65) The natural delivery of the speech, and the impressive sense of emotional embodiment of a person considering taking their life, strikes me with full affect through the transportation of myself into someone else’s domestic setting: a privilege that is denied to me by lockdown laws at the time of writing (May 3, 2020). The intensity of intimacy, present in the performance text, breaks through to me with particular force due to my newly constructed outer frame of experience during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Lesotho, southern Africa. Lady Macbeth (Liatile Mohale) gives instructions to a messenger whilst stood at her open front door. This is a familiar domestic setting—the lighting exactly what I would expect from an apartment block corridor. “Give him tending; / He brings great news.” (1.5.37-8) Within seconds, Lady Macbeth moves from this front door to her living room and the lighting undergoes a remarkable change. As Lady Macbeth begins to steel herself to undertake the murderous plan she has helped conceive, she kneels at a make-shift altar lit only by candles: “The raven himself is hoarse / That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan / Under my battlements.” (1.5. 38-40)

The shift from public face to private face is made all the more remarkable by the abrupt change of atmosphere and tone over the course of a single handheld shot, which follows Lady Macbeth’s movements. I’m reminded of Macbeth’s reflections to her later in the play, “False face must hide what the false heart doth know.” (1.7.83) Mohale’s excellent choice of a single, moving, hand-held take enlarges this important textual theme—on the surface, the Macbeths live in a regular apartment block, but, behind this façade this is the headquarters of a regicide plot.

London, UK. Viola, a South African living abroad in a new, sparsely furnished apartment, shares her thoughts with a fixed camera position. She is confused about Olivia’s response to their latest interaction. “Fortune forbid my outside have not charmed her.”

(2.2.18) As the realization dawns more acutely, and Viola's state becomes more frustrated, she exclaims, "How easy is it for the proper false / In women's waxen hearts to set their forms!" (2.2.29-30) and leaves the room but does not close the door. From the fixed position I can see her move through a corridor into the kitchen as she continues to speak, the audio quality from her home camera decreasing as she moves further away. She continues to speak at distance and I can hear the sound of a fridge door opening and a cutlery drawer being opened as Viola returns into the room with a tub of ice cream, helping herself to a healthy spoonful of the stuff and saying "How will this fadge?" (2.2.33) with her mouth full.

Harvey's smart use of props, camera position, and location manages to simultaneously emphasize the flesh and bones of the character through the familiar domestic response to frustration (comfort eating) whilst playfully toying with gender stereotypes which are presented in this regularly performed soliloquy. The here-and-now of Viola's situation is enabled by some of the literal properties of lockdown.

Since being posted on the Shakespeare ZA social media platforms, I have enjoyed watching these digital materials on a variety of levels and through a series of outer frames beyond the scope of the four examples above. As a lecturer in performance studies, like many of my colleagues across the education sector, I have had to adapt teaching materials and assessments away from the live event of theater and venture into the world of self-taping. Both the technical and creative choices of the films contained within the #lockdownshakespeare project have provided a fantastic resource for me to use as a teacher to give examples of how the restrictions implemented through the various Covid-19 lockdown rules around the world can be a stimulus for creative practice. Beyond this frame, it was encouraging to read that this project, conceived by Chris Thurman and Buhle Ngaba of the executive committee of the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa, pays each performer

for their labor (with some performers having chosen to work pro-bono)—achieved, in part, through donations and a corporate partnership with CN&CO.

In a country with eleven different official languages, there are only two videos (so far) that do not use English in their entirety: Amanda Seome’s performance of extracts from Welcome Msomi’s *uMabath* in the role of KaMadonsela/Lady Macbeth (#20), and Oarabile Ditsele’s performance of Macbeth in English and isiZulu (#27). This imbalance of linguistic representation on the project with the use of non-English languages only in *Macbeth*, a text loaded with supernatural connotations, offers the potential for up-to-the-minute stimuli for discussions related to identity and race.

The Shakespeare ZA website repays extended exploration, and also includes some informative and entertaining “behind the scenes” footage. In a time of uncertainty surrounding the future of professional performing arts practice, it has been a source of inspiration to stumble across this excellent work through the global connectivity of the internet. Perhaps #lockdownshakespeare could serve as a lesson to theatre companies around the world as an example of how to both support and promote artists, whilst concurrently creating a first-rate cultural product that is accessible to anybody with an internet connection.

Works Cited

Bennett, Susan. *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, 2nd ed. Routledge, 1997.

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