

Ying Wei Zhang, Katherine S. Brokaw, PhD, University of California, Merced

Introduction

Consider employing a four-hundred-four years deceased playwright and theatre itself in the fight against unsustainable actions, the promotion of ecologically-minded practices, and overall engagement with the local community. William Shakespeare and performing arts stuck around for centuries with myriad misconceptions holding general populations back from utilizing both for the attempt of betterment of our world. We analyze the manners in which both exist in current times as overlooked vehicles of potential positive change.

Abstract

In the 21st century, ecological and political crises plague human society. During these troubled times, can we turn towards the arts, specifically theatre and Shakespeare, as a longstanding yet overlooked method of communication? How can we implement the performative arts to better our world, starting with our local communities—and possibly to save us from disaster? This project examines ways in which theatre and Shakespeare may inspire collaboration and be used as a force for addressing the ecological and political problems we face today. I provide a look at theatre and the Bard's place in today's world, its ability to create change, and its limitations. What can theatre do and not do for ourselves, our community, and the world? What might the future bring and demand of theatre? Methods I use include examination of literature on theatre's usage in today's world and Shakespeare's place within this century; observation of my own participation in the building of the #EarthShakes Alliance; and analysis of interviews with theatre creatives from the United States and the United Kingdom. By providing an examination of potential possibilities and limitations of theatre, I demonstrate theatre and Shakespeare as vehicles of progress, especially in the pursuit of community-oriented action.

Methods

- This project utilized literature review, analyzing academic papers regarding Shakespeare and theatre, reception towards him in the 21st century, and the usage of theatre for activism and community-oriented action.
- I interned for the #EarthShakes Alliance, engaging firsthand with development and initial organization of this new organization.
- I conducted interviews surrounding eco-practices and experiences with theatre creatives in the United States and United Kingdom.



Present: Theatre and Shakespeare

- Eco-thematic richness: “I was thinking about *Macbeth*... and the idea that, once they've killed Duncan, nature kind of rebels and horses are eating each other--everything is kind of coming apart at the seams in the natural world and forests are starting to move and yeah, I think [Shakespeare] seems to be really tapped into how connected we are to the environment which gives lots of opportunity, lots of fertile grounds for artists to kind of draw at those ideas.” – *Alasdair Hunter, director, shakespeare.scot*
- Past meets present: “If you look at the people who have written about the history of early modern Europe in the late 16th and early 17th century, there is no question that that is a threshold moment for people really starting to realize the problems with the denuding of forests with water quality... air pollution, coal fires, you know, the whole bit that many people have written about in compelling ways.” – *Gretchen Minton, dramaturg, professor at Montana State University*
- Relevance within the community: “And so, they did a good deal of the Shakespeare dramaturgy, but they also were talking about what's relevant in Romania and the big thing about logging at the moment--logging a virgin forest.” – *Philip Parr, artistic director, Parrabbola*

Examples of Green Strategies

- Going digital: “Everybody has a cell phone and we send you a URL and you have the program. You know, there's backlash to this. People like their hardcopy programs as souvenirs, but you know, we're saving--what is it? Something like fifty thousand pieces of paper every year just by having this.” – *Stephen Burdman, artistic director, New York Classical Theatre*
- Wise purchasing: “So we looked into investing in some steel swords. But it took us almost a year to do this investment because we wanted to make sure we were going to get swords that are going to last us for at least five seasons coming up. We didn't want to buy these swords and have them last for one production or two productions.” – *Emily Fournier, executive director, Recycled Shakespeare Company*
- Rethink theatre: “Theater in Shakespeare's day was outdoors; they reused costumes. There wasn't much of a set. It was just the one wooden structure. It was much more ecological right? So I think there's ways that we can think about basically going back to older practices--having theater be something that's maybe more localized that isn't necessarily about the fancy sets so much as about what's happening on the stage between the actors.” – *Katherine Steele Brokaw, cofounder, codirector, coproducer, YosemiteShakes.*

Conclusion

- Though he is more than four hundred years deceased, Shakespeare's work remains popular and ripe for adaptations not limited to live theatre. More than 30 movie adaptations exist for *Romeo and Juliet* alone.¹
- Shakespeare productions can appeal to audiences regardless of class, education, and other social statuses.² His work, unprotected by copyright, permits freedom in directorial choices, whether one stays true to the script or tears out whole characters and scenes purposefully.
- As observed through experiences of theatre creatives, changes such as switching to digital programs, investing in long-lasting materials, and opting for reusable and recyclable costumes, props, and sets— or even employing outdoor venues and performing with what's already present— prove possibilities for reducing carbon footprint are available.
- Theatre is not an end-all nor a magical cure for the world's problems, but a practical place to begin encouraging activism, especially to address specific issues within one's community.

Bibliography

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Contact Ying Wei Zhang:
yzhang261@ucmerced.edu

Connect on LinkedIn (QR code available):
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/ying-wei-zhang-72596b165/>

