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# Shakespeare Meets Zoom and TikTok





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When Clinical Assistant Professor Dr. Danielle Rosvally conceived of a new literary-theater course to explore the boundaries of what qualifies as a theatrical space with regard to the works of William Shakespeare, she had no way of knowing quite how “unconventional” performing arts presentation would become due to Covid-19. Dr. Rosvally and her students have taken the opportunity to put the questions posed in her new *Place and Space in Shakespeare* class into practice in the digital medium as a result of the transition to distance learning.

“We have spent time analyzing Shakespeare’s works in a literary context, but also thinking about major pieces of theory which contribute to contemporary ideas about performance – especially beyond the proscenium stage,” explained Rosvally. “We talk about how place is connected to space. What does it mean to connect performance to space? Then we expanded from Shakespeare’s work into contemporary ideas.”

The growing popularity of site-specific theatrical works which challenge the boundaries of traditional theater is evident in every place from Disneyland, to New York City’s *Sleep No More* “performance environment” in Manhattan, and even to local, immersive, live storytelling experiences like *Five Wits* at the Walden Galleria Mall in Amherst, NY.

In the case of *Sleep No More* patrons are transplanted to a dimly-lit, five-story 1930s-era establishment dubbed the McKittrick Hotel, whose website claims it has been recently “restored” but which in reality is a block of warehouses in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, transformed into a hotel-like theatrical environment which patrons explore. Based on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, the performance space is deprived of nearly all spoken dialogue, and takes inspiration from noir films like Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*. It opened in March 2011 and “pushes up against our ideas of what theater is and could be,” said Rosvally.

Rosvally similarly describes *Five Wits* as “an immersive / problem-solving storytelling experience, like a series of escape rooms. One is an ancient tomb, another is a space ship.” No live human beings appear in the *Five Wits* environments either. Video and character voiceovers feature in super-immersive rooms and sets. After students experienced *Five Wits*, “we talked about their ideas about live performance and whether they consider it theater,” she said.

After the transition to distance learning, the seminar class also had an opportunity to discuss theatre-making in the Zoom era with Dan Beaulieu, Artistic Director of Seven Stages Shakespeare Company in Portsmouth, NH. Beaulieu is also co-director of [Shakespeare Happy Hours](#), one of the first efforts to make Shakespeare widely and publicly available via live online performances during stay at home orders.

"I originally asked Dan to come speak with the class because he's a theatre-maker with a great deal of experience producing Shakespeare in realms outside of traditional spaces," Rosvally explained.

When COVID-19 hit, Beaulieu's company quickly transitioned. Their current goal is to perform the entire Shakespearean canon of three dozen plays backwards, beginning with *The Tempest*, which is included in Rosvally's course. "Dan was thus able to speak with us about how he pivoted, what it means to rehearse theatre using Zoom as a performance / rehearsal space, and some of the practical tactics that he and his company are discovering. He could speak to the realities of performing online," Rosvally said.

"This was exciting because the students were asked to create online performances for their final project, and they were able to directly engage Dan with questions about methods, why he and his company are making the choices they are making, and how to actually do all of this."

Buffalo native Riley Dungan is a sophomore Theatre and Dance major whose special interest areas are dramaturgy, stage management, and lighting design. He considers himself more on the "dramaturgy side" of Design Technology.

"The final project was originally to stage a site-specific theater piece on campus (based on the Shakespeare works assigned in class), but then it went digital," he explained. Given the rising popularity of online video platform TikTok, Dungan's group of five students used it as the starting point for their five-minute piece.

### 2020 Spring: "Twelfth Night" as a TikTok Compilation (TH423 Final Project - NSFW for language)



*Language warning, may be offensive to some viewers.*

"Right now TikTok is popular because people are bored (from being home so much)," he explained. "We melded TikTok culture with *Twelfth Night* (to create) internet theatre."

Dungan explained that most TikTok videos are made from pre-existing, found, repurposed audio. The majority of the content is comedic, with "people

doing goofy dances or (in) funny scenarios. They're all hashtag 'relatable situations' with a lot of slapstick." In the case of his group's piece, the audio they used, including all of the dialogue, came from TikTok. None of the audio clips are of the student actors.

"We were trying to come up with a group concept about perception. We're all physically in different places so this is our representation of seeing the show from different angles, different places. And we wanted to make it contemporary. It was something we liked and thought would translate to internet culture, playing off the original dialogue and plot with new comedic dialogue."

The clips came from many places. "I Can't Take It Off" was found in another TikTok video, and Dungan repurposed the One Direction song "Olivia" specifically for its reference to "music as the food of love." Clips of comedian Kevin Hart and Dwayne Johnson were repurposed for *Twelfth Night* plot points during the boat scene in which Dungan used his Disney Legos, then added a digital "water" filter to make the boat appear to be floating.

"We picked the few things that (broadly) define *Twelfth Night* like cross-dressing, twins, and the yellow stockings," Dungan said. "Even today a lot of productions of *Twelfth Night* still keep all male casts for some reason. It seems to be a recurring trend for this play. In some productions Viola is played by a man playing a female, then concealing his identity as a male."

The other students participating in the *Twelfth Night* video include: Lauren Veruto, Hannah Wolland, Caitlin Deaver, and Jess Rothstein.

Hannah Wolland, like Dungan, is primarily a design technology student and more used to being backstage. If they had been able to complete their project on campus, "I would probably be helping more with adapting whatever environment we had chosen instead of (working) digitally. (For example), if we had worked at Baird Point, I might have figured out how to get power there, and other logistics."

However, Wolland's role for the video is "not all that much different. We all collectively decided when to work on this project. Then I organized and put together the compilation that went up on YouTube," she said.

Wolland also contributed the fun animated sections. "I discovered an animation feature within PhotoShop. Then I used the basic built-in video editor in Windows to stitch everyone's pieces together. I've worked a little bit with Final Cut when I did projection design for (a performing arts summer camp production of) 'Rent.' TikTok has pretty robust video capabilities onboard too."

"TikTok started as a lip syncing app, then evolved from there," Wolland added. "All TikTok clips can be either 60 or 15 seconds long. There's also a kind of TikTok subculture related to YouTube. TikTok allows you to download videos you like so there are whole compilations of short TikTok videos on YouTube. It's like making a mixed tape of your favorites."

"It was about embracing new technology instead of rejecting it off-hand. It's important that we (arts practitioners) keep evolving and incorporating younger generations so that we can survive. If TikTok is a way to do that, then that's good."

Having just completed her BFA in Theatre Design and Technology at UB this semester, Wolland has been accepted to the MFA Stage Design program at Southern Methodist University this fall. Down the road she said, "I would love to be a resident lighting designer for a major dance company. And way out I hope to teach."