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Shakespeare and the “Live” Theatre Broadcast Experience / Pascale Aebischer, Susanne Greenhalgh, and Laurie E. Osborne

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Pascale Aebischer, Susanne Greenhalgh, and Laurie E. Osborne, eds. *Shakespeare and the "Live" Theatre Broadcast Experience*. The Arden Shakespeare, 2018. 252 pp.

Reviewed by ERIC BRINKMAN

Pascale Aebischer, Susanne Greenhalgh, and Laurie E. Osborne's edited volume *Shakespeare and the "Live" Theatre Broadcast Experience* is an accessible introduction to some of the concerns in the emergent field of live broadcast studies. Comprised of an introduction, fifteen generally brief chapters by various authors, an epilogue, and an appendix listing the digital theatre broadcasts of Shakespeare from 2003 to 2017, this volume covers a wide range of interests and concerns centered on how scholars can analyze and think about the meanings embedded in and produced by the broadcast of "live" Shakespeare.

Aebischer and Greenhalgh open the volume by introducing some of their overarching concerns with the broadcasting of "live" Shakespeare: how do the ways in which audiences participate during broadcasts effect our understanding of their participation, to what extent are these broadcasts "live," and what effects do these broadcasts have on our understanding of the archive? Additional, somewhat more secondary, concerns include Shakespeare's status and cultural capital as a "superbrand" and the economics behind the production and distribution of Shakespeare as "Event Cinema." The introduction, as does most of the rest of the book, utilizes a mix of historical, formalist, and performance-based methodologies, and begins by grounding itself in the history of live theatre broadcast via film and television before moving into more theoretical discussions of what constitutes "liveness" and the political implications of the fact that many of the major companies involved in theatre broadcast are centered, and therefore centering, Shakespeare in the global marketplace as a distinctly British product.

Following the introduction, the main body of the book is divided into four parts: "Wide Angle," "In the Theatre," "Close-ups," and "Reaction Shots." Each of these parts loosely groups their respective constituent essays into a general field of concerns, which are, respectively: situating and historicizing broadcast theatre, reorienting the perspective of broadcast theatre to that of the performers and their "home" theatre-based audiences, close readings of several theatre broadcasts, and attempts to decenter and resist the above-mentioned pressure to view theatre broadcast as a primarily British experience by discussing the impact of theatre broadcast on non-British audiences.

Suzanne Greenhalgh begins the "Wide Angle" section of the book with her chapter, "The Remains of the Stage: Revivifying Shakespearean Theatre on Screen, 1964-2016," by arguing that, although lacking the contemporary preference for the presence of theatrical audiences, early experiments at creating "expressive" rather than "reproductive" films by using mixed, multicamera shots reflects a "hybrid" of theatrical, televisual, and cinematic aesthetics that would become the standard today for theatre broadcasts. In order to demonstrate that

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the methodologies used to film theatrical spaces have been central to the development of broadcast theatre, she focuses on two productions in the 1960s: the National Theatre's 1964 production of Olivier as Othello and Tony Richardson's 1969 production of *Hamlet*. These films are precursors to the contemporary development of broadcast theatre in that they resisted the then contemporary preference for filming on studio sets by instead foregrounding the actors with televisual mid- and close-range shots. These shots abstracted the theatrical space, thus allowing for the viewing audience to feel present, because they are not excluded by being reminded of the fact that they were not present in a specific theatrical space and time.

Susan Bennett's chapter, "Shakespeare's New Marketplace: The Places of Event Cinema" focuses on the access that "theatre-to-screen events" provide to alternative markets. Along with providing some of the numbers (in 2016, 2.2 million viewers across 55 countries watched an NTLive screening, as opposed to 787,000 attendees in the actual theatres), she argues that, using the *théâtrephone* as an example, there is a long history of advances in technology demonstrating their economic viability and ability to create new markets by attracting consumers through the use of high culture objects such as Shakespeare (44). NTLive has cashed in on this trend to charge higher ticket prices by convincing patrons that they are receiving a premium experience, with experts predicting Event Cinema will reach revenues of \$1 billion as early as 2019 (54).

Erin Sullivan's chapter, "The Audience is Present: Aliveness, Social Media, and the Theatre Broadcast Experience," turns the discussion to one of the central concerns of the book: how do we think about the "liveness" advertised by "live" theatre broadcasts? She argues that access to these broadcasts combined with interaction on social media allows the constitution of "communities of reception" (60). Drawing on Martin Barker's conception of "eventness," Sullivan describes how the intersection of theatre broadcasts and social media potentially creates a "shared sense of occasion" despite the absence of physical and temporal presence at a particular performance (62). As evidence, she analyses data collected by the Web-based tool Netlytic from tweets about the 2016 broadcasts of Kenneth Branagh Theatre Company's (KBTC) production of *Romeo and Juliet* (directed for the stage by Branagh and Rob Ashford and for broadcast by Ben Carson) and Shakespeare's Globe's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Emma Rice and Ian Russell respectively) to demonstrate that audiences "celebrate co-present togetherness" (65). The productions differed however in the level of interactivity between fans, because the *Dream* broadcast encouraged interactivity during the performance and broadcast, not just before, after, and during the interval, as was the case with the KBTC production (70-71).

In the final chapter in the "Wide Angle" part of the book, Rachel Nicholas' "Understanding 'New' Encounters with Shakespeare: Hybrid Media and Emerging Audience Behaviors" also looks at audience reception, this time from the perspective of new technologies that potentially change how audiences perform their role as audience members (78). Nicholas argues that her listening to an audio commentary by director Josie Rourke and star Tom Hiddleston amongst other cast members allowed her to perform as an "insider" amongst other

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audience members (82). Similarly, while viewing a broadcast of the *Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare*, Nicholas noticed that participants in the live-tweeting that accompanied the performance stated that the interactions on Twitter were more interesting than the actual performance (87), and, ironically, that in-jokes amongst participants allowed them to form cliques that may have made other spectators feel excluded (89).

Beth Sharrock, in her “A View from the Stage: Interviews with Performers,” opens the book’s second part, “In the Theatre,” by asking: under what conditions and in what ways do actors change their performances when they are aware that they are being recorded for broadcasting? She argues that, despite various directors urging them to ignore the cameras, actors “recalibrate” their performances in various ways, such as making “safer” choices (96), delivering soliloquies in a more “intimate” style (98), and ignoring the theatrical audience in the upper tiers (99). Similarly, Julie Raby argues in “A View from the Stalls: The Audience’s Experience in the Theatre During the RSC Live from Stratford-upon-Avon Broadcasts” that audiences’ experiences of a production are altered by being present during a broadcast filming. RSC audiences are surrounded by “an array of para-experiences” such as visits to historic sites, the possibility of backstage tours, and a Box Office embedded within a gift shop that offers a wide variety of Shakespeare-centered paraphernalia (104). Additionally, those present for broadcasts often have to accept sightlines altered by the presence of cameras, whose movements are visible and audible, and can expect a preshow address by the director. As the audience in the stalls is chosen by the theatre, they are therefore cast and directed, “becoming a vital part of the performance on screen” (109).

Pascale Aebischer begins the section that focuses on close readings with “South Bank Shakespeare Goes Global: Broadcasting from Shakespeare’s Globe and the National Theatre.” Borrowing from Stephen Purcell’s characterization of the Globe’s style of acting as “presentational” and contrasting it with that of the National as “illusionist,” Aebischer combines these notions with differences in the camerawork of their respective broadcasts in order to describe how broadcasts from these spaces can potentially trigger “affective” responses that generate a “distributed presence” among their audiences that feels participatory (115). Through a formalist reading of the camerawork involved, Aebischer articulates how, ironically, the Globe’s “house style” of including shots of the “groundlings” and its localized spatial differences in the filming of its productions, such as its 2003 *Richard II* televised on the BB4 and the 2009 DVD of *As You Like It*, exclude the viewing audience by continually presenting as a backdrop the Globe audiences, stage, and architecture, thereby reminding the broadcast audience of the fact that spatially they are not at the Globe and are affectively separate from its audience (124-25). Conversely, by not including the audience in the filming and via its “immersive” camerawork, NTLive’s “illusionist” broadcast of productions such as Polly Findlay’s 2016 *As You Like It* and Nicholas Hytner’s 2012 *Timon of Athens* remediates the affective experience of its local audience into its broadcast and allows that audience to also access an affective, and therefore collectivist, experience of the performances (119-121).

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Margaret Jane Kidnie's "The Stratford Festival of Canada: Mental Tricks and Archival Documents in the Age of NTLive" focuses on the "mental tricks" that audiences perform in order to view delayed broadcasts as "live" performances. In exploring the Stratford Festival of Canada's experiments in HD delayed broadcasts, she notes that it is a feeling of exclusivity derived from generating their own closed-off site of reception that gives audiences a constructed sense of liveness (137). However she also insists that, at some point, after whatever degree of constructed liveness has been left behind, what is left over in the archive is traces of a performance that has disappeared (144).

The centrality of formalist and empirical analysis in this volume means that less attention was paid to issues of gender, race, and sexuality. Except for a few fairly offhanded comments (Olivier's production of *Othello* in blackface is "embarrassing"), the only chapter to address race in any detail is Jami Rogers's "Talawa and Black Theatre Live: 'Creating the Ira Aldridges That Are Remembered' – Live Theatre Broadcast and the Historical Record." Her chapter chronicles the attempts by the Talawa Theatre Company and Black Theatre Live to produce and record performances by actors of color not just in secondary, but also lead roles. Historically in the UK, only seven actors of color have played Hamlet and six King Lear in the UK since 1930 (152), and many of those performances have been essentially erased from the historical record by virtue of having been produced by regional and minority-led theatre companies that did not have the resources to record their productions (150). Therefore Talawa and Black Theatre Live have made efforts to preserve an archival record, through broadcasting and its resultant recording, of their productions of *King Lear* (directed by Michael Buffong and starring Don Warrington) and *Hamlet* (Jeffery Kissoon and Raphael Sowole) respectively. By drawing attention to their work, Rogers thus also makes an important intervention into the theatrical history of actors of color performing Shakespeare in England.

The last essay in the "Close-ups" section of the volume is Peter Kirwin's "Cheek by Jowl: Reframing Complicity in Web-Streams of *Measure for Measure*," in which he argues that the reedited broadcast version of their production, by utilizing more close-ups in order to capture the emotional performances of the actors, removes the possibility of the audience feeling complicit in the performance. Kirwin articulates how the two versions of the broadcast articulate different meanings: the live-mixed broadcast by Thomas Bowles, utilizing more wide-angle shots, captures the onstage *mise en scène* in which Duke and the chorus observe Angelo's actions, thereby making themselves, and by extension the audience who is also watching, complicit in his behavior through their silence. The second version of the production, a remixed version by directors Donnellan and Ormerod, shifts the focus—through the use of more close-up shots—to the emotional responses of the actors—thus removing the chorus and thereby the potential experience of the audience to feel complicit.

The final section of the book is devoted to explorations of the experience of attending Event Cinema in non-British locations, such as Japan, Hong Kong, Bologna, Ohio, and France, respectively. Kitamura Sae starts off in her "The Curious Incident of Shakespeare Fans in NTLive: Public Screenings and Fan

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Culture in Japan” by recording the responses of Japanese fans to inferior subtitling. By complaining directly to NTLive UK rather than NTLive Japan, social media groups were able to bring about an improvement in the quality of the subtitles for future NTLive broadcasts in Japan. Michael Ingham in “Shakespeare and the Theatre Broadcast Experience: A View from Hong Kong” is less interested in the “hybridity” or imagined liveness of theatre broadcasting than in the political complexity of staging Shakespeare in postcolonial Hong Kong, which can be viewed from a pro-mainland nationalist perspective as a continuation of British cultural imperialism.

Keir Elam, in “Very Like a Film: *Hamlet* Live in Bologna,” argues that local venues effect expectations that can impact audience reception. He demonstrates the local variety in responses by analyzing the differences in the reception of Lyndsey Turner’s 2016 *Hamlet* at two separate venues in the “cinema city” of Bologna: the Cineteca Lumière, in which audiences perceived the broadcast to be a film, and the Odeon, which has “trained” its audiences in the reception of “mixed-genre events,” who are then more likely to respond to the broadcast as if it were live. Similarly, Ann M. Martinez, in “Shakespeare at a Theatre Near You: Student Engagement in Northeast Ohio,” like Sullivan, describes the notion of “communities of reception” to articulate how not only the theatrical broadcast location, but also individual differences in audience members’ theatrical experiences can impact audience reception. For example, students who are Theatre majors respond differently to broadcast theatre than those who are trained in English, because they are aware of the “forfeiture of viewing autonomy”—the fact that the camera is choosing what they can see of the performance (202).

In the last chapter Pascale Aebischer, in “Shakespeare from the House of Molière: The Comédie-Française/Pathé Live *Roméo et Juliette* (2016),” details how French efforts to resist the Anglicization of their theatre culture has resulted in their own experiments with the viability of theatre broadcasting. Her close reading of Pathé Live’s broadcast of Éric Ruf’s production of *Roméo et Juliette* reveals that, rather than attempt to reconstruct an experience of liveness for their broadcast viewers as British theatre broadcasts tend to do, it highlighted the differences between viewing the production in the cinema versus in the theatre. The broadcast utilized close-ups, shots of the audience viewing direct address by the actors, and a shot sequence that depicted Romeo “in exile” enacted by the actor traveling outside of the theatre (211), giving its viewers an experience that the home-theatre audience could not have had.

Finally, Laurie E. Osborne finishes out the volume by arguing that understandings of “liveness” will continue to be reshaped by “paratextual” elements such as trailers, digital programs, and audio tracks, which induce “spectatorial collaboration.” She also speculates that 3D and VR technologies could make their way into the theatrical broadcast world (225).

All-in-all, *Shakespeare and the “Live” Theatre Broadcast Experience* is a fairly comprehensive and very readable introduction to the subfield of “live” theatre broadcasting in Shakespeare studies. In general, I wonder if it might have benefitted from a more detailed discussion and deeper theorization of some of its

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key terms, such as “liveness,” “hybridity,” and “community.” For example, although several different ways to approach and think about “liveness” are mentioned—I tend to lean towards Kidnie, Kirwin, and Elam’s view that “liveness” is constructed—the book never explicitly discusses what the stakes of categorizing theatre broadcasting as a “unique” experience or new genre versus analyzing it as a “hybrid” or “blended” art form might be.¹ Nor do the authors precisely describe the characteristics of the “communities” formed through the interactions of theatre broadcast audiences on social media. It is possible, however, that such discussions were omitted in order to keep the volume more readable and to keep the conversations moving, lively, and open for further debate. It is therefore an excellent introduction for that purpose and will surely spark further discussion and insight within the field.

Notes

1. Martinez, for example, argues that, because theatre broadcasts are a hybrid of film and theatre, they should be considered a “new view into a performance” (204). Is a hybrid something new or a blending of things that are old, and what are the stakes choosing one side or the other of this equation?

Eric Brinkman is a PhD candidate in the Theatre Department at The Ohio State University. His dissertation research focuses on utilizing affect theory, performance, queer, and transgender studies as disciplinary approaches in order to develop methods for engaging in more inclusive performative and reading strategies.