

# S K E N È

**Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies**

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“Well-Staged Syllables”:  
From Classical to Early Modern English Metres  
in Drama

Edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi

# SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

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*Founded by Guido Avezzù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri*

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PETRA BJELICA\*

## Shaping the Edges of a New Vision: The Verona Shakespeare Fringe Festival 2021<sup>1</sup>

Abstract

The article deals with the first edition of the Verona Shakespeare Fringe Festival. It gives an account about the founders, programme, and the main aim, describing how the festival uses Shakespeare as *lingua franca* to create a unique vision – a combination of research, theatre productions, new readings, and diverse theatrical, adaptation and dramaturgical practices. The guiding principles of the festival are multicultural approaches and multilingualism, transnational exchange, dialogue between and a showcase of emerging artistic projects, nurturing education in the direction to and from the audience. On 24 and 25 July, the festival hosted six productions performed at the Teatro Scientifico, along with a special interview with all the participants and the organizers held on 26 July. The festival opened with an overview of the history of *Commedia dell'arte* in Fabio Mangolini's *The Lazzo of the Fly and other Stories*. It included Nina Sallinen's *Poor Poor Lear*, Jaq Bessell's *Shakespeare for Breakfast*, Elena Pellone's *The Rape of Lucrece*, John Blondell's *So now I have confessed that he is thine... Erotic Trajectories*, and closed with a choreography based on *The Tempest* called *Dancing Shakespeare: Mirage* performed by Les Dynamiques. All the performances delivered a fresh approach and set the foundation of adding Verona Shakespeare Fringe Festival to the map of relevant and exciting spaces for Shakespearean productions.

KEYWORDS: The Verona Shakespeare Fringe Festival; Shakespeare festivals; theatre; adaptations; performance

“The fringed curtains of thine eye advance  
And say what thou seest yond.”

*The Tempest* (1. 2)

The first seeds of the idea for the Verona Shakespeare Fringe Festival were planted in summer 2020, brought about by serendipity, a student's enthusiasm for a Shakespearean production, and an equally fervent answer

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and support from a director to share his ideas and work. From one supportive and relentless ‘yes’, a domino effect of collaborations between devotees of theatre, Shakespeare and scholarly dialogues led to the creation of a new festival. This anecdote summarizes the aim and nature of the Verona Shakespeare Fringe Festival – sharing and fostering collaboration between emerging artists and students, eminent scholars and experienced theatre practitioners.

The Verona Shakespeare Fringe Festival was envisioned and founded amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic by Silvia Bigliuzzi and Sidia Fiorato from the University of Verona and the Skenè Research Centre for Interdisciplinary Theatre and Drama Studies, David Schalkwyk from Queen Mary University of London and director of the Centre for Shakespeare, along with John Blondell from Westmont College and the director of the Lit Moon Theatre Company in Santa Barbara. In a time and under circumstances that demanded an infringement of established forms of organisation, with new limitations and yet opening some new possibilities, they plunged into unexplored territories for theatre festivals. Once more Verona became an important place to enrich Shakespearean productions. Although the city has been hosting a famous Shakespeare Festival since 1948, the Fringe Festival aimed to offer a new theatrical space existing on the edge compared to mainstream approaches. Being on the fringe, yet at the same time offering a breach of borders between disciplines and theatrical practices, the festival dealt with Shakespeare as *lingua franca* through research, theatre productions created specially for the occasion, digital transfer of new readings and different modes of renderings, diverse theatrical, adaptation and dramaturgical practices. The guiding principles are multicultural approaches and multilingualism, transnational exchange, dialogue between and a showcase of emerging artistic projects, nurturing education in the direction to and from the audience. Gestated and assembled under unique circumstances, the festival honoured a distinctive type of exchange, togetherness and inclusivity in a time of isolation – a rewarding experience for all the participants.

On 24 and 25 July, the festival consisted of six productions performed at the Teatro Scientifico: two videos and four on-site performances. A special interview with the artists was held on 26 July at Santa Marta, a huge military complex built in the 1860s and once used to distribute bread, now readapted and modernised as part of the University of Verona. The audience had a chance to have a conversation with all the participants and the festival’s organizers.

The festival opened with *The Lazzo of the Fly and Other Stories*, performed by Fabio Mangolini, who, besides specialising in the servant roles of *Commedia dell’arte*, is a director, pedagogue and author. *The Lazzo of the Fly and Other Stories* was conceived in 1994, while he was studying the art of

Japanese theatre, as a gift to his Japanese friend, intending to demonstrate the richness of Italian heritage. Thus, the performance was conceptualised as a lesson and a journey through all the characters and masks of the Italian tradition. Mangolini invited the audience to have a closer look at the transnational exchanges made by troupes of *Commedia dell'arte* and their possible influences on Elizabethan theatre and Shakespeare's dramaturgy, especially the connections and convergences between the famous Shakespearean comical actor William Kempe and characters played by the Italian troupes. Past theatrical practices can paradoxically demonstrate that theatre can create newness as a place of exchange and sharing – the ultimate art of encounter. A variety of comical types were presented, explaining how their characters are reflected in their masks and particularities of body language. *The Lazzo of the Fly and Other Stories* was a perfect opening for the Shakespearean universe and a proper introduction to its merging with Italian culture. In the interview with the artist, Mangolini highlighted that the distinctive feature of *Commedia dell'arte* troupes was to spontaneously change the dramaturgical devices and the order of the plot according to the tastes of the audience, and to borrow and use acting mechanisms of other colleagues freely. In the same vein, some aspects of Nina Sallinen's performance might end up in his next show, as he jested in the interview.

Nina Sallinen, an actress from Finland and co-founder of *A Walkabout Theater Company*, performed *Poor Poor Lear*. Sallinen and Katja Krohn produced and adapted the play, directed by Krohn. It started out as an intention to diminish two prejudices: that women cannot be comical in male roles and that females can successfully act the role of Everyman. The character of a 90-year-old Finnish theatre star who performs an intimate adaptation of a female version of *King Lear* is carried out by Sallinen's incredible transformation, marvellous use of body and scenic movement. The plot of Shakespeare's tragedy mirrors the intentions of the old Dame – to lure her daughters to her show and wreak revenge on them for disregarding their old mother. The *myse-en-abyme* structure of the adaptation highlights the pain of the abandoned parent that Sallinen brings forth with comical and pompous expressions of grumpiness and tender vulnerability. In the end, this swan song transforms into a profound rumination on the nature of acting and the ever-present histrionic question – who is an actor when s/he is not seen and revealed on the stage? Also, it brings out a more specific gender issue – whether a woman must choose between being a mother or an artist. It is a clever and inspiring, tragicomical yet emotionally deep staging of the need to be loved and seen, with a profoundly Shakespearean atmosphere blurring the boundaries between acting and being. Nevertheless, Sallinen's initial wish expressed during the talk with the artists is fulfilled: *Poor Poor Lear* succeeded as a superb demonstration that female actresses can be hilarious.

In an adaptation directed by Jaq Bessell, a very talented group of young performers from the Guilford School of Acting (Emily Dilworth, Tomas Howser, Brodie Husband, Caitlin O'Donnell and Elliott Samuels) created a peculiar experiment: *Shakespeare for Breakfast*, bits and pieces from some of Shakespeare's most famous monologues and dialogues, seemingly without any method or guiding thread. However, as the performance unfolds, the audience begins to understand that the group of actors is trying to achieve the impossible in the Shakespearean universe – to control their love lives and the course of action. The dynamic of wittiness is heightened by the juxtaposition of Shakespeare's text with the intimate atmosphere of a domestic setting – one might not expect to hear Helena's monologue from *Midsummer's Night Dream* filmed in a toilet for example. Due to some doubling by the use of mirrors and a creative camera use, the mixture of registers works perfectly to add to the freshness of the approach. Moreover, *Shakespeare for Breakfast* reveals the remarkable vitality of the plays in their adaptability to a numerous range of contexts and atmospheres. It might be seen in the light of Polonius' announcement of the theatre troupe in *Hamlet*:

The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited. (2.2)

The play was screened as a video recording and the audience had a chance to hear first-hand about its main challenges and the inspiration behind it from Brodie Husband and Jaq Bessell themselves via Zoom. Husband demonstrated an exquisite understanding of the complexity of such a dramaturgical concept and moved with ease and awareness through Shakespeare's complete works when talking about his ideas and creative inspiration.

*The Rape of Lucrece* was produced and performed by Elena Pellone, the Artistic Facilitator of the Venice Shakespeare Company and founder of Anærkē Shakespeare, an actress and scholar with an MA from the Shakespeare Institute, where she is currently working on her PhD project on 'directorless Shakespeare'. Even though it was hard to adapt a narrative poem into a monodrama, she achieved the main goal of the performance – to give a thrilling and vital voice to a violated woman. In Pellone's performance, Lucrece took over all the words from all other characters and fully controlled the narrative. The Renaissance grandeur and grace of her presence with a subtle yet powerful emotional charisma surpassed the difficulty of speaking of shame. By taking control of her story and transforming it into a theatrical experience, the supposed victim reflected many anonymous stories of numerous women that have been molested or sexually assaulted. In this touching performance, the violated body of a woman became a capacious medium for others and dominated the stage. Shakespeare's text merged with

the confessions projected on a white curtain, in complete harmony with Pellone's understanding of theatre as space for and of togetherness, and as an event of authentic communication set in the present.

John Blondell is a theatre director and Professor of Theatre Arts at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California. He is the Artistic Director of the Lit Moon Theatre Company and its World Theater Festival. Directing over 90 productions, he has led with untiring enthusiasm and energy another 60 *Lit Moon* productions all over the world and his *Henry VI, Part 3*, part of Balkan Trilogy performed at the 2012 Globe to Globe Festival, was the initial seed that germinated into the creation of the Verona Shakespeare Fringe Festival. The gentle, repetitive, soothing rhythms of Blondell's *So now I have confessed that he is thine... Erotic Trajectories* emphasised the meditative aspect of Shakespeare's sonnets and generated an almost mantric dimension, as if Shakespeare's poetry – chosen and adapted by Silvia Bigliuzzi – could melt and merge into other artistic forms: evocative music by James Connolly, videos of dancers and actors in the landscapes of Bitola, North Macedonia, Paige Tautz's and Mitchell Thomas' voices recorded in Santa Barbara, California, and the bodies of Nina Sallinen and Rosario Campisi, the actors in the live action created in Verona during the festival itself. *So now I have confessed that he is thine... Erotic Trajectories* was a hypnotic and immersive journey for the audience. It was created exclusively for the festival, with improvisations necessitated by the pandemic. The love triangle which one can read in the Sonnets was made even more perplexed by the introduction of another female poet. All these fragmented bodies, voices and landscapes – as various theatrical devices – supplemented the erotic lack created by desire. The performance surmounted geographical distances and aroused erotic yearnings, foregrounding the meditative potency of the Sonnets into a live event as a shared feeling of seemingly unreachable absence/distance. In the end, the audience, as an active participant in collecting the fragments, felt these lacks as a hypnotic, paradoxically ungraspable, yet present experience – and remained in spellbound silence.

*Dancing Shakespeare: Mirage* was performed and produced by the young dance company *Les Dynamiques*, consisting of dancers and choreographers Maddalena Lucchetta and Giulia Giacon. Drawing from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the choreography consisted of the gentle striving of two silhouettes towards a mirage of contact, creating gentle tension in testing whether this is possible or whether the miracle is just controlled machinery. Their soft and elegant movement conjured the nature of Ariel. Dancers seemed pulled by the magic of Prospero's invisible strings, transferring a feeling of ephemeral reality that was supported by the mesmerising music of the Arabic lullaby *Yalla tnam*, sung by Golshifteh Farahani. With its airy atmosphere, *Dancing Shakespeare: Mirage* evoked the feeling of being on the limit of a dream.

All performances were journeys through time and space, exposing either historical theatrical practices (such as those of *Commedia dell'arte*), or silenced and marginal female voices, sometimes discarded as old or shameful, violated and vulnerable – journeys through the complete works of Shakespeare that were mixed and scrambled, bodies of dancing women evoking Shakespearean atmospheres, and the fragmented and reassembled eroticism of sonnet confessions. Shakespeare's works spoke from the margins, through new media and new means, creating a companionship and community of scholars, artists and audience. The festival generated a rare feeling, somewhat forgotten and yearned for a long time among theatre and Shakespeare lovers – a need for contact, the murmuring of the theatre crowd and the thrill of the possibility of surprises and last-minute changes that often happen on stage. It created a communal event filled with buzz and conversations after the performances. The Verona Shakespeare Fringe Festival provided a long-awaited cathartic effect of pulsating theatre, in which we were breathing freely even behind our masks. Like Miranda, guided by Prospero, we might be looking at a new world that requires an opening of our perception. In that sense, the fringed curtains of our eyes were adapted to this new experience, and the festival achieved what Elena Pellone highlighted in the interview – theatre itself has been seen and the festival was in service of a theatrical mirage. As so often with and in Shakespeare, the collective experience was transformed into “something rich and strange” (*The Tempest*, 1.2), that continues growing seeds for the summers to come.