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Shakespeare Bulletin

The Journal of Early Modern Drama in Performance

Special issue on

"A Midsummer Night's Dream in Modern Performance"

Volume 40

Number 3

Fall 2022



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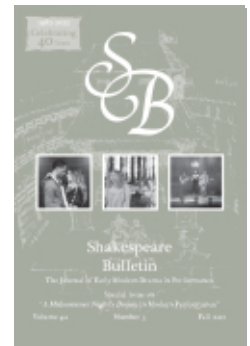
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Shakespeare Bulletin, Volume 40, Number 3, Fall 2022, pp. 417-437
(Article)

DOI: 10.1353/shb.2022.0037

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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Local Habitations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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The poet's pen

[. . .] gives to airy nothing

A local habitation and a name. (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.16–18)

*I*f Hamlet resides in Kronborg Castle in Elsinore (Helsingør), Denmark, and Juliet's balcony can be palpably located in Casa di Giulietta in today's Verona, Italy, where is the forest of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? All over the map, including in the nominal Greece. Location and setting are key to our understanding of performances of *Dream*, even though, ironically, the comedy does not carry location-specific, plot-driven markers in the ways that *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Macbeth*, the "Scottish play," do. While *Dream* is set in Athens, the Greek setting does not materially affect the play in the ways that Scotland does in *Macbeth*. *Dream*'s disruptive but stubbornly patriarchal woods, where most of the dramatic action takes place, represent every place and no-place; they are both an evanescent dream (or nightmare) and a site of social experimentation with real-life consequences; they are both utopic and dystopic. As a floating signifier for variegated social spaces, the woods contrast with, but do not eradicate, the structural inequities of the Athenian court. The woods, as a canvas for new ideas, have invited bold reimaginings of cultural locations that promote what I call social reparation in adaptations and productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. While in the US "reparation" often refers to the remediation of historical injustices, such as efforts to restore land rights to Indigenous people, I use the notion of social reparation here to theorize remedial uses of Shakespeare in adaptations that have the potential to give artists and audiences more moral or artistic agency. By imagining more inclusive local habitations for *Dream*, these socially progressive

adaptations seek to remedy injustices in our times and the asymmetries of power that inform Shakespeare's play. In this sense of reparation, we might say artists have "rescued" Shakespeare from a patriarchal tradition of interpretation.

It is now a propitious time to examine malleable social space within performances of *Dream*. Playing and play-going spaces are particularly pertinent issues in performance studies when much of the world's population have been confined to one place for part or a majority of 2020–22 due to public health measures related to the global COVID-19 pandemic, when people wished they had "but slumber'd" while the nightmarish, viral "visions did appear" (Epilogue 3–4). It comes as no surprise that the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) chose *Dream* as their foundational text when they staged a motion-capture, virtual production in 2021, directed by Robin McNicholas. At-home audiences interacted digitally with Puck and the sprites through the ether and across oceans. Set in a computer-generated forest, the RSC's show was nowhere and everywhere on Earth, mediated by the screens of personal devices. In fact, multiple pandemic-era digital productions drew on Shakespeare's *Dream*, including productions by the Prague Shakespeare Company and Sofa Shakespeare. But dramaturgically constructed social spaces were equally important to several other performances prior to the RSC's digital rendition. This article draws on three performances—filmic, stage, and digital—to explore the question of *Dream*'s varied local habitations and what each new site contributes to social and artistic reparation.

Place and Social Space

The notion of place features prominently in such reparative adaptations. Dramaturgically constructed localities—settings, cultural references, performance venues—constitute a new social space where the characters' and audiences' universes intersect. Metatheatrical and metacinematic devices add further layers to site-specific meanings. Expanding the notion of the playing space, these productions conjure places that draw on culturally specific meanings of the story, anticipate the evolving meanings of the social spaces inhabited by the characters, and sometimes counter audiences' expectations. As Andrew Bozio theorizes, "place" in early modern drama "functions as both the object and the medium of thought" (2). The idea of place is paramount in reparative adaptations, and place as a denominator of social contexts has become fluid and hybrid in many productions.

My theory of performance space as a social construct draws on Henri Lefebvre's thinking about the production of social space, namely the in-

terplay among *le perçu*, or the perception of everyday practices in an urban space; *le conçu*, or the representations of these spatial practices in films or diagrams (such as metro maps); and *le vécu*, or the spatial imaginary of places with particular labels such as gendered workplaces, public restrooms, or gay bars (79–80). Lefebvre pays special attention to the roles of mediations and mediators in facilitating various social spaces (77). The production of performative space often goes through a similar process of giving meanings to a stage or film set through actors' somatic presence and audiences' perception of the representations of social practices within that space. Actors and their characters orient themselves in the magical woods in *Dream* where some social impositions are lifted while others are imposed. Playgoers and film audiences, in turn, go through a parallel process as they imagine social spaces that extend beyond the stage or the screen as suggested by worldmaking.

Dramaturgical and performative localities influence the cultural meanings of *Dream* today. Several adaptations have aimed to make amends in and to new dreamscapes. Tom Gustafson's 2008 *Were the World Mine*, a film set in a private boys' school, culminates in a performance of *Dream* that miraculously sets things right in the town. In 2016, the GLBT Community Center of Colorado used a production of *Dream*, staged at the appropriately named Butterfly Pavilion in Denver, to raise funds for the Center's transgender support programs. This Colorado production and *Were the World Mine* tapped into Shakespeare's canonicity and *Dream*'s central themes of transformation and self-discovery to envision a more just society. Also in 2016, as part of the British Council's Shakespeare Lives program, Gecko Theatre and the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center co-produced a dance-mime production, *The Dreamer*, which fused English and Chinese cultural spaces to tell the story of "leftover women," unmarried women over the age of thirty, in an unspecified modern city. In 2021, the aforementioned live, digital production by the RSC both created an ephemeral, ethereal playing space and enabled the dreamscape to enter its at-home audiences' private spaces. As a performance during pandemic-induced lockdown and draining social distancing mandates, the show restored sociality through human interaction and civility through live theater.

To examine the significance of place in performances of *Dream*, I consider, in chronological order, the intersecting, multilayered localities in a film that depicts theater-making (*Were the World Mine*, 2008), a paratextual, cross-cultural mime-dance production (*The Dreamer*, 2016), and the RSC's interactive, digital performance *Dream* (2021). The first,

built around the conceit of the making of a school musical, is both a version and a play-within-a-film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; lines from Shakespeare often capture the situations faced by the film characters. The latter two productions were largely wordless, and focused instead on the energy drawn from actors' kinetic movements. All three adaptations draw on the dynamics of their newly created localities to perform various social or artistic mediations.

These filmic, stage, and digital performances exemplify three approaches to mediation: (1) social reparation in which Shakespeare's work is imagined to have a remedial effect on our society; (2) illustration of the questions of inequities raised by *Dream*; and (3) formal experimentation for artistic innovation, using *Dream* as a pretext. In all three instances, *Dream*'s fluid locality anchors, enables, and endorses some characters' transformative experiences and self-discovery. These works create new playing spaces and cultural sites that host social reparation. The emancipation or social reparation that these productions enable is sometimes temporally demarcated, because the newly created social space exists within a play-within-a-film or a play-within-a-play framing device. The ills that these works seek to mend range from attitudinal biases against homosexuality and misogynist ageism to audiences' declining interest in the classics. Even before the new challenges posed by the pandemic, theater companies had been working to attract larger audiences from across a more diverse social spectrum. Some of the inclusive strategies included more diverse casts to make audiences feel represented, digital performances that enabled more equal access for audiences, and amplification of parts of the storyline that resonate with contemporary social justice concerns. These strategies counter the traditional, artistic authority of Shakespeare's work that is used to wield power over artists and audiences. Collectively, these three approaches to mediation are informed by multifaceted appropriations of social spaces and reparative power, including (1) the more generative move of giving power to a community; (2) individuated power within, as in individual expressions of self-worth; and (3) what Mary Parker Follett has called "power-with" (76), as in a collaborative relationship.

Staging *Dream* Onscreen: *Were the World Mine*

Tom Gustafson's low-budget film was a long time in the making. In 2003, he made a short film with a title that had Shakespearean and present-day references: *Fairies*. Set and shot in a high school in Chicago, the short carries an optimistic tagline that refers to the reparative capacity of

Shakespearean musical: "a musical dream come true." In 2008, Gustafson expanded *Fairies* into his debut feature film, with a new title, *Were the World Mine*, that simultaneously references its outcast protagonist Timothy's wishes and Helena's plea to Hermia in *Dream*:

Were the world mine, [. . .]
 The rest I'd give to be to you translated.
 O, teach me how you look, and with what art
 You sway the motion of Demetrius' heart. (1.1.194–7)

Both Helena and Timothy wish to be transformed into a different person, someone who fits in and owns the social space. High schooler Timothy (Tanner Cohen) has a crush on rugby team captain Jonathan (Nathaniel David Becker), but, being openly gay, he is pressurized by his mother and bullied by his peers and the scripture-quoting townspeople in Kingston, Illinois. As a result, Timothy daydreams frequently about a world in which he can be himself, a world without rugby-enhanced heterosexual masculinity. That world is eventually sanctioned, and even sanctified, by Shakespeare's text. Shakespeare's language, as a student says in the locker room, would only make sense "to anyone with a brain," but it serves as "a stand-in for thoughtfulness and abstraction" (Kozusko 172) in the school musical.

The act of daydreaming serves as more than a narrative device that creates plot parallels to Shakespeare's *Dream*. The film interpolates scenes of a distracted Timothy in class, during gym practice, or out and about, with dream sequences composed of point-of-view shots from his perspective that portray alternate realities as musical theater, foreshadowing his eventual, decisive role in the musical *Dream*. For example, during gym class, Timothy has a vision of his rugby-loving classmates dancing to honor him as he walks between the rows. The aggressive ball throwing is transformed into a Busby Berkeley-style musical number with undulating, geometrically arrayed dancers. The spectacle vanishes when Timothy snaps back into reality as a ball hits him in the face. While brief, this dream sequence transforms the toxic environment of the gym hall into an affirming and inclusive musical stage. The stage as playing space emerges at the end of the film as a venue for sanctioned genderplay in a dream-come-true scene.

An underdog figure, Timothy is a stand-in for an introverted Puck in this film. Despite being a talented singer, he does not feel confident owning the space of the classroom or the school stage, and tells his English teacher Ms. Tebbit (Wendy Robie) that he is not an actor. Following the conventions of what Matt Kozusko calls "saved-by-Shakespeare" stories

(171), he ends up being cast as Puck, complete with a pair of not-so-subtle fairy wings, in the seniors' musical production of *Dream*. Performing in the school musical becomes a therapeutic experience for Timothy with regard to his social trauma.

The wish to be transformed into a more popular person who fits in with social norms is as mundane a theme as it gets in teen flicks about unrequited love, but *Were the World Mine* is notable for using two other tropes to convey social reparation. Firstly, the film uses the trope of nostalgia—reimaginings of a more hospitable past—to reconstruct queer adolescence as a space in lost time, i.e., a high school musical. Secondly, the film employs the device of a play-within-a-film to create an ideological distance from the socially repressive dramatic action of Shakespeare's play, similar to how John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) appropriates plot devices and lines from *Romeo and Juliet*. The former—manufactured nostalgia—is a key theme in queer narrative. The latter—films about theater-making—is a popular mode of Shakespearean appropriation. Both nostalgia and play-within-a-film contribute to the construction of an accommodating, but not always conformist, locality for emoting. In the case of *Were the World Mine*, that locality consists of the stage-within-the-film and the classrooms of Morgan Hill High School.

The first trope the film draws on is that of nostalgia. Nostalgia in storytelling is a form of location-specific and location-enabled affective labor, especially in *Were the World Mine*'s inverted and invented history of gay youth. The reality-defying queer coming-of-age story plays out in a utopic space in which queer adolescence is fondly remembered. This, of course, is a stark contrast to the larger world outside of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'s "Green World" (Hopkins). As Gilad Padva surmises, "many gay men have merely sordid, dreadful youth memories [. . .]. The high-school environment is remembered as [. . .] an alienated, even dangerous place" (146). Queer adolescence is often characterized by loneliness and ostracism, and is often portrayed as such in gay youth melodramas of the 1990s and 2000s (Howes quoted in Padva 147). *Were the World Mine* boldly takes a different approach of "turning the traumatic into the fantastic" through the "therapeutic power of nostalgia [. . .] interwoven with the glory of the musical genre" (Padva 147–8). In this film, queer adolescence is restorative and socially progressive. The protagonist, Timothy, ends up being surrounded by supportive individuals on the musical stage and in his high school and town. This is a form of reparative and therapeutic rewriting of the past.

While nostalgia may seem to espouse magically reparative qualities, it has two potential drawbacks. First, within the film, the nostalgic fantasy, buoyed by the visual and acoustic excess of musical numbers, sometimes gives the impression, as Jay Weissberg writes, that some characters are unconvincing “dumbed-down caricatures” (42). Secondly, nostalgic reconstructions of an imaginary past actually reiterate how “defective and diminished” the present is and highlight “our inability to produce parallel [positive] qualities” in the present (Bennett 5). In Susan Bennett’s more pessimistic view, nostalgia in performance is not a sustainable solution to social ills, because its “corrective to the present” (5) comes with limited efficacy.

The second dramatic trope employed by the film is the convention of a play-within-a-film. In the final scene of the film, which depicts the final scene of the students’ performance of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the teacher tells Timothy, “it’s time to fly.” Sporting his wings, the queer high schooler delivers the epilogue with confidence as both Puck and himself. He locks eyes with his mother Donna (Judy McLane) in the audience, who is now more supportive, as he carries on with Puck’s thinly veiled faux apology. As he speaks, fairies, played by his classmates—formerly hardened by rugby and now “civilized” by Shakespeare—dance joyously around him. Puck’s epilogue carves out a sanctified space for making amends. At this juncture, the three concentric circles of social and fantastical spaces—Timothy’s dreams, the play’s world, and Morgan Hill High and the town of Kingston—finally converge to become a queer-positive space.

In tandem with manufactured nostalgia, the play-within-a-film creates a gay-centric space to counteract what Sara Ahmed has identified as the predominantly compulsory tragic tone of queer literature. The film’s period, too, witnessed tragic queer youth melodramas, though there are now more and more queer teen dramas that are not tragic, such as Netflix’s series *Heartstoppers* and *First Kill*, both of which premiered in 2022. *Were the World Mine* anticipated the recent rise of narratives about happy queers. Within this amended social space, nostalgia serves to rehearse events as Timothy wants them to play out, and the play-within-the-film carves out a space for this to happen. One boy in the rugby team’s shower-room refers to the senior play as “that Shakes-queer crap”; in the students’ minds, Shakespeare is “queer”—compared to rugby—because they deem it archaic and irrelevant. But it is “that Shakes-queer crap” that enables Timothy to overhaul the compulsorily heterosexual attitudes in Kingston, Illinois.

Playing an active role in shaping this space, Timothy concocts a Puck-inspired potion, which he carries around in a floral spray, and uses it to make many characters fall in love with same-sex partners, including rugby coach Driskill and the headmaster, both of whom oppose, in an earlier scene, casting boys in female roles in Shakespeare. With the Puck-inspired potion, Timothy effectively merges the spaces for theater-making and socialization in his offstage life. This newly merged social space is not always inclusive, however. Before Timothy manages to anoint everyone, the straight characters show disgust when being approached by same-sex characters who are now homosexual. As Catherine Silverstone observes, these scenes mock the stereotypes of “queers as predators” and heterosexual fears about a hypothetical “queer planet” (320). Timothy’s now queer school and town also reflect what Lisa Duggan calls “the new homonormativity” without subverting heteronormative institutions such as “family values” (179). In the new town created by Timothy’s magic potion, gay love is no longer shunned or demonized; it is welcome by all as long as the relationships are monogamous. In other words, this assimilationist new homonormativity upholds, rather than counters, heteronormative assumptions about romantic love. The purpose of this assimilation is to depoliticize gay issues and domesticity. The conversion of townspeople’s minds is magical, rather than intellectual, in nature, and, like a stage play, must come to an end at some point.

The two tropes—nostalgia and play-within-the-film—tone down the mistreatment of minority characters while retaining an oppositional edge through the genre of parody. The playing space within the school musical, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and the fantastical setting of the film itself (Timothy’s magical potion) are devices that are intended to shield the film’s negative representation of queerness (such as “queers as predators”) from criticism. For example, when the principal opposes casting boys in female roles on stage, the English teacher defends her decision by referring to the stage practices of early modern England. At the same time, this lighthearted film maintains a political edge through its parodic take on Puck’s potion which bends social norms (in *Were the World Mine*) rather than creating unlikely couples (in Shakespeare).

Shakespeare as an icon plays a key role here. The alternative social space created in *Were the World Mine* is constructed quite literally by way of “Shakespeare.” On the English teacher Ms. Tebbit’s desk sits a white marble bust of Shakespeare, who, along with the image of Bottom as an ass on a calendar nearby, oversees the lessons on iambic pentameter. Further, quotes from Shakespeare and Shakespeare-inspired language appear early

in the film and reemerge frequently. Ms. Tebbit, who clearly subscribes to the idea of psychological universals and a neoliberal humanist vision of the canon, brings a liberal sprinkling of Shakespeare-ness to nearly every scene through Shakespeare-esque adages, such as “Awaken and empower what’s within,” and direct references to the play at hand, such as “unite rhythm with words and they will unlock to empower you, like *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* come true.” Whether it’s faux Shakespeare or direct quotes, this language, which is always coupled with swelling soundtracks, lends emotional credibility to the emancipatory social space that is under construction. Walking in on Timothy and Jonathan kissing each other in the dressing room after the high-stakes and well-received musical, Ms. Tebbit brings Shakespeare’s comedy into the backstage space by quoting Lysander to them: “It is not enough to speak, but to speak true.” The film concludes with her giving a wink as she invites the film audience to their newly created space, quoting Theseus: “Who is next?”

Cross-Cultural Habitation: *The Dreamer*

Locality is constructed as much by nostalgia as by collective cultural memory. In 2016, many performances mushroomed to mark the quatercentenary of Shakespeare’s (1564–1616) and Tang Xianzu’s (1550–1616) death, with several of them being Sino-British co-productions which drew heavily on *Dream*, including *A Midsummer Night’s Dreaming under the Southern Bough*, presented by students of the University of International Business and Economics in China and the University of Leeds at the University of Leeds Intercultural Theatre Festival and Edinburgh Fringe; and *A Shakespearean Handan Dream*, co-directed by Leon Rubin, artistic director of Bristol Old Vic, and Ke Jun of Jiangsu Kunqu Opera, staged in St. Paul’s Church in Covent Garden, London (He 291). At the center of these projects are plays about the dream motif by Tang and Shakespeare, two equally important national poets of unequal global stature who have been recruited to serve Chinese and British cultural diplomacy.

The most notable cross-cultural production of 2016 was the mime-dance piece entitled *The Dreamer*, which portrayed characters and their shifting moods through gestures, dance, and pantomime. Co-directed by Rich Rusk and Chris Evans of Gecko Theatre, the story was performed by a Chinese cast from the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center. Gecko provided choreography, theatrical conception, and music; actors from Shanghai performed the nearly wordless sequences without having to contend with the challenge of acting in a foreign language. The show won the 2016

Peter Brook Equity Ensemble Award. Characters in this production moved between an onstage “real” world where injustice against women played out, and an onstage dreamscape where more career possibilities and life choices opened up for female characters. The performance was an example of physical theater with very little spoken language; the few lines in Chinese were difficult even for Chinese-speaking audiences to decipher, because the actors mumbled as if they were sleepwalking. The sense of place here, therefore, was constructed primarily by minimalist stage sets and actors’ fluid movements among different fictional spaces, rather than by Shakespearean language as in *Were the World Mine*.

The piece, inspired by Shakespeare’s *Dream* and Tang’s *Peony Pavilion* (1598), was commissioned by the British Council for the 2016 Shakespeare Lives program. Even though the piece was conceptualized in the context of the quatercentenary of Shakespeare, Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* only has a token presence in the production. One of the memorable features of *The Dreamer* was its construction of a drifting locality. The timid Helena, a hybrid character drawn from one of the four young lovers in Shakespeare’s comedy, was a victim of the derogatory notion of “leftover women” in China, as I have argued elsewhere (Joubin 76). Director Rich Rusk revealed in the stage bill for the show’s European premiere that while developing the show in Shanghai, he and his team decided to use this cross-cultural story of unrequited love to critique the social phenomenon of “leftover women.” They “visited the famous Shanghai marriage market where parents of singles gather to negotiate dates and matches, often without their children knowing.” Rusk sees Shakespeare’s Helena as someone “who feels left behind by her peers” in a similar way, because she constantly “asks what is wrong with her” (2).

The term *shengnǚ*, “leftover women,” refers to educated women who remain unmarried in their thirties and beyond, and who typically reside in urban areas (Fincher 1). The term evokes leftover food (*shengcai*, Lake 9). This stigmatizing label is applied mostly to urban women (Ji 1058). Ironically, the word is homophonous with *shengnǚ*, “saintly women,” even though the phrase “leftover women” is derogatory; there is nothing saintly in being derided by one’s society for being an unmarried woman. Mistreated and discriminated against in the “real” world on stage when she was awake, Helena found solace in her dreams. Helena moved between her mundane world of a dead-end job and her dream, in which she encountered Du Liniang, the heroine of Tang’s tragedy. Like Du, Helena pined for a lover who only exists in the dream world. Since Helena’s love story, like that of Du’s and that of Timothy’s in *Were the World Mine*,

only exists in a dream world, she eventually succumbed to the suggestive power of those dreams and was no longer able to distinguish the dream world from her daily realities. The production thus brought Shakespeare and Tang together in a hybrid cultural space in order to repair social ills that have affected millennials.

The production told this story through “episodic snapshots” of Helena’s visions and her life, but the production’s fluid sense of place—through its fusion of different types of social and performance space—turned out to be confusing for audiences and therefore led to its uneven reception (Mazzilli 291). There are several examples that demonstrate how this hybrid cultural space was constructed onstage. The scenes of Helena working in an office were grounded in reality, while scenes of Helena dreaming were surreal and occasionally nightmarish, with floating beds, floors that opened up, storms inside a bar, and a river in the bedroom. According to the artistic department of the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center, this blurring between reality and dream was intended to make the show compelling, since “in dreams, the brain edits various materials of the real world with a mysterious logic” (quoted in Zhang). A similar strategy of bringing the dream world to bear on characters’ lives is employed in *Were the World Mine*, where Timothy’s daydreams blend into his time on stage and in school.

The Dreamer did not deploy Shakespeare’s words—as *Were the World Mine* does—to sanctify the stage as a space to foster social justice. Tangential references to the lovelorn Helena served as a pretext for the dance-drama to stage a narrative of female empowerment. Part of this empowerment was achieved through a sense of fluid place, which was constructed and articulated through its cross-cultural stage set. Helena was empowered to move freely and fluidly between different social spaces and between different cultures. The modular, flexible set and industrial scaffolding created a sense of a floating, interstitial place. Fluid movements between places correlated to the two co-producing companies’ identities. In one scene, Helena’s bed dissolved seamlessly, having been taken apart swiftly by Oberon, Titania, and unnamed stagehands reminiscent of Shakespeare’s fairies. In the blink of an eye, Helena emerged in a new place. An invisible trickster transported Helena back and forth between the two worlds, and she, like Timothy in *Were the World Mine*, gradually broke free of her overbearing parents and, by extension, the constraints that her cultural position had imposed on her. It was the fluid and inclusive social space that set her free.

The props were fluid as well. For example, a telephone cord morphed into an umbilical cord that connected different places, disparate dreams, and ultimately different cultures. Modern audiences accustomed to naturalistic performances tend to feel, as Stephen Purcell writes, “dissociated from the presentation of a fictional world when the rules governing its presentation” are broken unexpectedly (94). Unlike *Were the World Mine*, which maintains ideological and artistic distinctions between the playing space of the musical and the social space of the film’s characters and audiences, the cross-cultural *Dreamer*’s modern staging practices did away with the binary between theatrical naturalism and dream sequences within its fictional universe. *The Dreamer* fused Shakespeare’s and Tang’s narratives to launch a proof of concept. In the context of the then-amicable Sino-British relations, the production served to solidify the public’s faith in cultural exchange, to promote Tang’s international reputation, and to promote gender justice.

Digital Habitation: The RSC’s *Dream*

The habitations for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* that we have explored so far, including fusion social spaces, were constructed onstage or onscreen. I would now like to turn to born-digital performances that construct a dream world in cyberspace. This section examines the dynamics of digital habitations which were borne out of necessity, and how this innovation sought to mend society’s pandemic-era exhaustion of physical and emotional distancing by introducing interactive elements to bring audiences together.

COVID-19 has upended our lives and changed the operational definition of live performance. Due to lockdown orders and restrictions on travel, audiences—trapped at home—took to streaming to engage with Shakespeare as a familiar classic. The pandemic has led to a proliferation of born-digital productions and the streaming of archival videos of Shakespeare in Western Europe, Canada, the UK, and the US. While the airborne virus has unmoored common assumptions about performing spaces, it has also ushered in new opportunities for artistic creativity. Theater director Erin B. Mee writes optimistically that digital theater has enabled “artists from around the world” to gather in virtual spaces “playing to international audiences rather than [. . .] to people who can get to a particular piece of real estate” (208–9). Indeed, thanks to Zoom, TikTok, and other platforms, any performance is now potentially a global event that links any number of localities. For instance, in 2020, Creation Theatre and Big Telly Theatre promoted their participatory performance of *The*

Tempest, with the tagline: “live, interactive, and in your living room”—anywhere on earth, a brave new world. 1,428 tickets were sold for their seventeen performances (Gonzalez 369–70). This is one of several examples of digitally facilitated interactive performance.

The RSC, however, took digital performance one step further into an interactive habitat mediated entirely by digital avatars within a computer-generated forest. In March 2021, as COVID vaccines were rolling out across the world, but restrictions on live entertainment remained in place in most countries, the RSC launched a live production, entitled *Dream*, in which audiences interacted with actors digitally. The web-based, interactive production provided such paratextual material as artists’ statements, designers’ visions with illustrations, succinct information about *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and a virtual lounge for audiences before the show began. The paratextual performance was buoyed by a large amount of visual material that derived from and supplemented *Dream*, recontextualizing Shakespeare’s play through its paratexts. The locality of this avatar-led digital performance was ethereal. There were no physical stage sets. The broadcasting location itself was immaterial, because all audience interaction remained online. This unique locality provides important contrasts to the stage and screen localities we have analyzed so far.

Before further analysis of this production’s locality, I would first like to consider the disembodied form of the performance itself. Using live capture and gaming technologies, the camera took online audiences through a long corridor backstage and onstage before going into a virtual reality environment inspired by *Dream*. The actor, who was not yet in character, spoke into the camera to address the audiences directly. Once we were transported into the fantastical forest, the movements of fairies generated live sound and music. Cobweb, for instance, was represented through close-up shots of Maggie Bain’s staring eyeball. Wearing motion capture sensors over their suit, E. M. Williams was transformed into Puck, a figure who wandered the night as an assemblage of pebbles in the shape of a human body. Audiences followed Williams through computer-generated forests and landscapes which carried humanist, environmentalist messages, but—as an abstract figure made of pebbles—they were also disassociated from the human.

Similar to the Sino-British *Dreamer*, the RSC’s *Dream* thrived on hybrid, fluid localities both analogue and digital. After the forest was destroyed by a storm, which may serve as a metaphor for COVID’s destruction of live theater, the audiences were jolted out of the digital world into the reality of the motion capture studio. A lonely, weakened Puck

knelt on the floor, perhaps symbolizing actors' plight of performing in isolation during the pandemic. The seamless transition from actors' digital avatars to their somatic presence in the small black box theater fused the paratextual performance with a series of interconnected, ethereal spaces for performance and cultural signification.

The novel concept of a collaboratively constructed fictional and social space drew a large following across the globe. During the post-show talk-back, questions came in from all over the world, from as far as Melbourne, Australia. On Tuesday 16 March 2021 more than 7,000 ticket holders logged on to watch the show live, some of whom used the interactive feature included in the show, through which participants could click on firefly icons, which lit up the path for Puck by throwing balls of light across the screen. There could well have been far more than 7,000 audience members, because each ticket allowed for several people to enjoy the show in front of the same screen.

The fireflies created by live audiences, however, were ornamental, as they did not have any direct impact on the performance or on Puck's movement. One reviewer found himself becoming disengaged from the idea that he could affect the live performance in any meaningful manner. The problem was likely one of scale, with hundreds of viewers firing the fireflies, "the forest floor was soon coated with illuminated orbs." Audiences lost personal connection and interest when it was impossible to know "which fireflies they had sent Puck" (Broadribb 494). However, another reviewer raised a salient point about engagement and suggested that the audience's frustration mirrored the dramatic situation in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The RSC's *Dream* reminded audiences that humans were only part-time dwellers in the forest and, like the characters facing the destructive storm, human agency over natural forces was illusory. As "part-time participants" in the production, audience members too had "only the illusion of agency" which paralleled "the unknowable, even sinister, forest through which the Athenian lovers move" (Wright 495).

Several features of *Dream* contributed to social justice and inclusiveness, which hasn't been discussed extensively in reviews. In her study of virtual performances during quarantine, Anna Gonzalez writes that "the COVID-19 pandemic exposed systematic injustices within neoliberal global paradigm," particularly in the performance industry (380). *Dream* did not address these injustices explicitly beyond its message about environmental injustice when Puck's forest was destroyed. However, the digital performance did work with, rather than out of, challenges of accessibility imposed by the pandemic-induced period of physical isolation.

First, the production's more affordable pricing—compared to in-person performances—made it more inclusive. Secondly, the capacity of the show was not limited to a fixed number of seats in a physical auditorium, and the privilege to attend the production was not restricted to those who could make it on time and in person to a particular building in a particular country. Thirdly, *Dream's* virtual format made it more accessible to audiences in more diverse social spaces at home, during a commute on public transportation, or any other contexts. Despite its technological flaws, the performance attempted to create a community through audience interaction and post-show discussion at a time when a large number of individuals were in physical isolation due to the ongoing pandemic. Citizenship-based international travel restrictions were a major setback in terms of individual mobility in 2021. Public concerns over COVID-19 in Spring 2021 had not subsided either, since those were the early days of vaccine rollouts even in wealthier countries. Last, but not least, the anonymity of the audience-created fireflies and the more leveled playing field enabled broader audience participation, including those who might not have been inclined to participate in any public performance for any number of reasons, such as social or minority status, introvert personality, or disability.

It should be noted that the cast attempted to create bonds with the audience before and after the performance by showing not only their avatars but also their human faces. The audiences' own subjectivity was disembodied, just like that of the actors using motion capture technologies to translate their somatic presence into digital avatars. The digital performance did not so much replicate in-person theatrical experiences as it enabled an experiential and affective quality of performance on personal electronic devices for private consumption. Blurring the boundary between film and theater, the RSC's *Dream* was detached from the palpable bodily presence of actors.

The most important achievement of the production was its global reach. The global visibility and huge turnout were welcome news for the RSC, but the technological wonders failed to woo some critics. *The New York Times* called it "a small copse of some really lovingly rendered trees" (Soloski). *The Guardian* acknowledged that the technology could well be "a new arrow for the quiver of live theater," while critiquing the show's lack of "an emotional dimension" (Clapp). The reviewers' frustration came from, ironically, their extra-textual intrusion into the playing space, a space that—in the mind of audiences accustomed to naturalist theater—should be cordoned off, free from contaminants of the "outside" world. As liber-

ating as the computer-generated dream-world may be, it collapsed upon itself due to its attempts to generate audience participation.

The key takeaways from digital theater in the era of COVID-19 are expanded notions of liveness and social spaces. Live performance, at this juncture, includes both in-person and synchronous, real-time online events. The site of live performance is distinct from the site where at-home audiences experience that performance—mediated by technologies of representation and their computer screens. The notion of a performance site is no longer tied to a brick-and-mortar building. Financial gains remain ancillary to online performances during the pandemic, because not all productions translate well to digital streaming. Inclusive social spaces now refer to both in-person and virtual interactions. Even when the online audiences only had limited agency in shaping Puck's digital forest due to technical limitations, they have been invited to participate in real time from different physical locations, which was not made possible before the pandemic by most companies supported by Arts Council England. The theaters' global digital footprint is a symbolic means to connect with their patrons and to maintain the companies' cultural capital. In this new context, what is reparative about this digital performance space is its capacity to strengthen the human connection that has been lost in the pandemic.

More importantly, the RSC's *Dream* was a rare specimen of a performance with a virtual locality that was shaped digitally and in real time by the players and—to a much smaller extent—by the playgoers. The localities in Gustafson's *Were the World Mine* and Gecko's *Dreamer* may be hybrid, multilayered, and fantastical, but they come into being, or dissolve as the case may be, at the whim of their characters who, like Shakespeare's Bottom and Puck, choose to dream on or to be dream-weavers. Audiences in these two cases do not have agency to shape the fictional space. The RSC's *Dream*, by contrast, reflected Manuel Castells's theory that space is "the material support of time-sharing social practices," practices that are simultaneous in time (441). That is, audiences located across the globe helped the actors navigate the digital dreamscape synchronously. The RSC amplified the fluid nature of the fairies' world in Shakespeare and used that as a foundation for an audience and actor co-constructed social space. Even as some audiences were disappointed by the experimental and allegorical nature of the production, the digitally generated forests—unique in each day's presentation since the digital image was created from live motion capture—suggested new ways in which audiences could reshape a performance and social space without being co-present in person.

The interface of the screen is now a portal through which audiences experience Shakespeare's narratives with a range of associated artistic elements. That interface is itself shaped by modern ideologies and the structures of screen genres. The COVID-19 pandemic has further blurred the distinctions between films intended for the multiplex, television, or streaming in terms of funding structures, aspect ratios, and scope of production. The RSC *Dream* shows that interfaces and the channels of distribution are merging quickly. Like the previous two productions discussed in this article, the RSC's *Dream* has its limitations. As much as *Dream* has modeled a new way to foster inclusiveness in terms of audience accessibility, much remains to be done in the performance industry about other areas of social justice, such as racial justice. Previous practices that had been normalized are now being rethought by practitioners and audiences alike, and previously privileged groups are reflecting on their own vulnerability (Gonzalez 379).

Restorative *Dreams*

These three cases exemplify contrasting approaches—of nostalgia, meta-theater, and virtual stage—to constructing a restorative space through Shakespeare's *Dream*. All three types of localities—stage, screen, and digital—bear cultural significance and play a role in creating inclusive social spaces, but interactive digital performance has the unique ability to reach audiences across the globe in real time.

In *Were the World Mine*, through the device of a play-within-a-film, film audiences gain a dual consciousness: the awareness of identities as both manufactured onstage and filtered by cinematic devices. Even though Timothy's compelling performance of Puck un-queers *Dream* and, as Kozusko argues, co-opts queerness through "something more acceptable" and ordinary, the film as a whole is able to maintain a certain ideologically oppositional edge thanks to its parody and depictions of theater-making. Performances of homosexuality are enriched by gamesome enactments of roles in the play-within-the-film. This is in line with my observation elsewhere that parody, metatheater, and metacinema problematize heteronormativity (Joubin 73–4).

Gecko's *Dreamer* fused the dreamscapes of Tang's and Shakespeare's plays to create a fluid space for physical theater that empowered Helena to transform from a "leftover woman," marginalized by ageism in a heteronormative society, to a dreamer in pursuit of her own passions and who leaves social norms behind.

Finally, the RSC's *Dream* asked its audience to envision a new type of playing space that evolves along with audience input. This space, its flaws notwithstanding, is potentially restorative in that it expands the possibility of live performance and enables audience interaction with actors and virtual stage sets to some degree. But, as reviews of these shows reveal, some audiences accustomed to theater-making in more linear rather than fusion spaces were unable to appreciate Gecko's physical theater and RSC's digital performance.

When it comes to born-digital performances, it is not poetic license but rather the director's mouse and audiences' internet bandwidth that give "local habitation" to the "airy nothing" of fairies. So too did in-person productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* before COVID-19 capitalize on the significance of inclusive social spaces. Shakespeare has evolved from a cultural nomad in the past centuries—a body of works with no permanent ideological home base—to a digital nomad in the twenty-first century—an artist whose livelihood depends on commissions online and who works from any number of physical locations. It is the "local habitation," physical or metaphorical, that gives this comedy new meanings in each iteration. A nomad may not have a place to call home, but they can also lay claim to any cultural location.

The word "amend" appears no fewer than five times as a verb, noun, and adjective in Puck's epilogue, addressing the restoration of social order and the enhancement of women's agency, and appeasing potentially offended audiences. As Natalia Khomenko and Sarah Crover point out in their introduction to this special issue, productions in the past decades have followed Puck's cue to "mend" social ills (social reparation); to sanitize the disturbing inequities portrayed in the play (offering a corrective to *Dream*); or to use the play as a platform for radical experimentation (formal innovation). Modern, socially reparative performances situate the dramatic action in new environs and use *Dream*'s deceptively harmonious comic form to explore sensitive or contentious topics.

The cases discussed here show that the metatheatricity of *Dream*—framed by the concentric circles of the fairies' world, Bottom's dream, the rude mechanicals' play, and Theseus's court—enables certain kinds of stories to be told in reimagined social spaces. Shakespeare as a canon has already been endowed with various forms of moral authority since the Victorian period, as exemplified by Matthew Arnold's belief that high culture, as symbolized by Shakespeare, represents "the best that has been known and said in the world" and thus "the human spirit" (viii; xiii). However, the recent social justice turn in the arts is distinct from Arnold's

conception of Shakespeare's singularity. Many of the works discussed in this special issue take a reparative approach to *Dream* not because of artists' belief in Shakespeare's moral superiority but rather due to a collective investment in an ethics of care. For theater and film practitioners, an inclusive Shakespeare gives relevance and purpose to art as well as drawing a larger, more diverse clientele. Beyond its promotion of social justice, reparative performance carries substantial affective rewards, and emotional investment in a story that spurs people into action. Emotion and reasoning are in fact not mutually exclusive. Neuroscience research suggests that the neural mechanisms "underlying emotion, motivation, and learning" are intertwined, "overlapping circuits" (Cavanagh 3). Contemporary relevance fosters stronger affective connections to a play and to the world outside theater, creating more sustainable "local habitations" for the characters, actors, and audiences.

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