



# Quarto

The Magazine of the  
Shakespeare Theatre Association  
Spring/Summer 2023

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By Eric Randolph & Rana Moussaoui, AFP

All the world's a stage, but the irony is the rest of the globe often has an easier time understanding William Shakespeare than English speakers. Thanks to frequently updated translations that dispense with the archaic Renaissance language, foreign audiences often find the Bard easier to follow.

Take *King Lear*, a new version of which recently opened at the Comedie Francaise in Paris. In the original opening scene, the Earl of Kent reacts to being exiled by saying: "Sith thus thou wilt appear, Freedom lives hence, and banishment is here." The new French version translates as, "Since this is how you want to appear, freedom is elsewhere and exile is here" – a much simpler sentence to modern ears. Olivier Cadiot, who wrote the new translation, said his job was "like removing the varnish from a portrait to create something a bit more fresh – not something vulgar and modern, but to strip it back a little to render it more alive." Mostly, he aims for "fluidity and precision," he told the AFP news agency, but he could not resist the occasional moment of playfulness, such as translating the famous phrase "every inch a king" into the very current-sounding "total royale."

In English, many would consider such toying with the Bard sacrilegious. There were howls of protest when the Oregon Shakespeare Company set out to translate his works into contemporary English in 2015 ("The danger to Shakespeare is real," thundered one petition). But that leaves many average theatre-goers unable to comprehend the world's most-performed playwright. "English audiences are at a disadvantage because the language has evolved and is more and more distant. They need footnotes, props and staging to understand," said Alexa Alice Joubin, a Shakespeare scholar at George Washington University.

Indeed, a study by the British Council and YouGov in 2016 found that Shakespeare was considered more relevant in many non-English-speaking countries than back home. Overall, 36 percent of British respondents said they did not understand Shakespeare compared to 25 percent elsewhere. This matters because the difficult language can obscure the important and relevant debates in his work on issues such as race, social hierarchies and the legitimacy of rulers, said Ruben Espinosa, a Bard expert at Arizona State University. "There's a lot of cultural relevance," he said. "But the language is so complicated that a lot of the time that is lost on people. If we want to treat him as sacrosanct and leave him untouched, it's going to be a body of work that's dying on the vine." Other countries don't have this problem. In Germany and France, famous versions by Goethe and Victor Hugo's son, Francois-Victor, are still used, but modernized translations appear regularly. The same is true in Japan, where early versions (such as a 19th century take on *The Merchant of Venice* entitled *Life is as Fragile as a Cherry Blossom in a World of Money*) used archaic Japanese to mirror Shakespeare's style but have been superseded many times since.

Some say too much is lost in modernization. "The emotion is embedded in the musicality of the words," argued scholar James Shapiro in *The New York Times*. Macbeth's speeches, he said, were "intentionally difficult; Shakespeare was capturing a feverish mind at work."

But others argue Shakespeare's global popularity shows that the plays are just as powerful without the original words. "There's something innate in the characterization and the way the stories are told that is iconic and unique," said Joubin. "*Romeo and Juliet* is so popular," she said, "not just for the language, but its fast pacing—rare for a tragedy."

Joubin believes Shakespeare himself would have approved of updated versions. "Someone that creative – I very much doubt he would say you can't modernize my plays," she said, "He himself modernized the English language for the Renaissance era."



## A Letter from the Editor

Dear Colleagues,

"When sorrows come, they come not in single spies. But in battalions!" Claudius' woes and Shakespeare's words in *Hamlet* have been ringing in my ears all through the pandemic and into 2023. This issue of *Quarto* includes two important questions: "Do your audiences have trouble understanding Shakespeare?" and "Are Mental Health Coordinators essential to the theatre process?"

Both questions speak to the somber realities of producing Shakespeare in the 21st century and, as you know, there are so many other questions and confusions related to producing theatre at this moment in time.

I welcome *Quarto* articles and letters, especially from STA members, on these or any other timely topics on producing Shakespeare internationally. These are troubling times indeed when both outliers and outright liars dominate our daily political diatribe and lawyers and therapists play central roles in our producing and educational endeavors. Send me your thoughts.

Happy reading!



Jim Volz, Editor, *Quarto*  
Professor, California State University, Fullerton



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Martin Drapkin

The lamentable change  
is from the best;  
The worst returns to  
laughter.

Edgar  
King Lear

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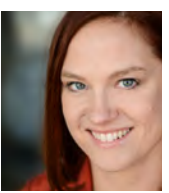
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## A Letter from the STA President

Dear STA Family and Friends,

When Shakespeare in Paradise joined STA in 2018, I had no idea at all that we would ever be in a position where we would be able to interact with all the other global Shakespeare professionals around the world, much less have members of our festival sitting on the Executive Committee or becoming President! The welcome our little Bahamian company has received from the Association as a whole is still a source of amazement and joy to us all. And it is a marker of the good will and openness that lie at the heart of STA.

What a pleasure it was to host you all in The Bahamas this past January and what a pleasure it was also to be able to think about Shakespeare and the production of his works from different perspectives! It's exciting to be able to bring a range of approaches and understandings to the collective table and learn from one another. Because that is part of what the Association was founded for in the first place, after all—to discuss issues and share methods of work, resources, and information. What excites me most is how eager STA has been to engage in the dialogues that accompany that sharing: dialogues about access, about decolonization, about diversity, and always, all the time, dialogues about Shakespeare.

As we return to a life beyond COVID—a mostly maskless life, where we can all gather in the same rooms and breathe the same air and enjoy the same performances—we must remember what we learned during the pandemic: that voices are disparate, kindness is central, and great opportunities arise from challenging situations. Let us prepare to shift our worlds just a little, while never losing sight of our central and original purpose.

Nicolette Bethel  
President, Shakespeare Theatre Association  
President and Co-Founder, Shakespeare in Paradise



Front Cover: Shaquan Pearson, Deimoni Brewington, and Lloyd Epke as The Witches in Chesapeake Shakespeare Company's *Macbeth*, directed by Rayme Cornell. Photo by Kiirstn Pagan.



An American Players Theatre audience enjoying actors Marcus Truschinski, Ronald Román-Meléndez, Jamal James and Nate Burger in the 2022 production of *Love's Labour's Lost* in Wisconsin. Photo by Hannah Jo Anderson.

**EDITOR:** Jim Volz, International Consultant for the Arts and Series Editor, Methuen Drama (London)

**ASSOCIATE EDITORS:** Cindy Melby Phaneuf, Professor, University of Nebraska, Omaha, Patrick Flick, STA Executive Director

**GRAPHIC DESIGNER:** Patrick Flick, STA Executive Director adapting original designs by Philip Wayne Hermansen, Art Director, Utah Shakespeare Festival

**EDITORIAL CONTRIBUTORS:** Nicolette Bethel, Kati Grace Kirby, Evelyn Carol Case, Patricia Duff, Mark Edelman, Patrick Flick, Sabrina M. Scott, Eric Randolph and Rana Moussaoui, Caitlin Volz.

**GUEST CONTRIBUTORS:** Kati Grace Kirby, Evelyn Carol Case, Patricia Duff, Sabrina M. Scott, Eric Randolph and Rana Moussaoui, Caitlin Volz.

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Dr. Jim Volz, [jvolz@fullerton.edu](mailto:jvolz@fullerton.edu)

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Questions about photo size? Please contact Patrick Flick at [patrick@stahome.org](mailto:patrick@stahome.org).

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#### STA MISSION

The Shakespeare Theatre Association (STA) was established to provide a forum for the artistic, managerial, and education leadership for theatres primarily involved with the production of the works of William Shakespeare; to discuss issues and methods of work, resources, and information; and to act as an advocate for Shakespearean productions and training.

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[www.stahome.org](http://www.stahome.org)

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