

**The Bard Gets Sporty:
Shakespearean History as Comedic Blood Sport or,
Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Score on the Fringe**

Canada's vast history of Shakespearean adaptation is unique. Just how unique gets figured in Chris Coculuzzi's and Matt Toner's ambitious anthology of plays staged by their company Upstart Crow, which has made a career of comically adapting the Shakespearean canon in its entirety for fringe festival presentation. Upstart Crow morphs Shakespeare's texts into the context of live sports events, including World Cup soccer, the National Hockey League, rugby, the Olympics, and even gladiatorial games, that precursor to modern "bread and circus" style events. Who was to figure that Shakespeare, so often dubiously transposed to the world of high (or worse, classical) art, would find restored voice in fringe comedy productions that parody and blend the ethos of pro sports with the blood sport machinations of power-seeking, power-losing sovereigns? This anthology, then, gathers for the first time, a major addition to the canon of Canadian adaptations of Shakespeare. Theatrical adaptation of Shakespeare is no small national fixation. There are some 500 play-adaptations of Shakespeare in the Canadian stage repertoire dating back from pre-Confederation through to the present representing an enormous investment of cultural energy and ingenuity in Canadianizing the Bard.

Now the words "fringe" and "comedy" may conjure up intimations of frivolity, especially in association with the stratospheric cultural iconicity of Shakespeare. But let's remember Shakespeare's own roots in Elizabethan popular culture, not to mention his skill at making a buck. After all, the Globe Theatre, in which Shakespeare had a share, was one of, if not, the first joint stock companies (now lovingly referred to as "corporations") along side the British East India Company, whose history of imperial trade and plunder extended over the centuries following its establishment by Royal Charter on December 31 1600. The British East India Company, for those who'd rather forget this pertinent fact, played a key role in establishing the British Raj in India, a colonial enterprise only undone by Mahatma Gandhi, after years of struggle, in 1947. The Globe Theatre, by contrast, was founded as a joint stock venture in 1599, and played its own role in staging forms of theatrical nationalism that justified and commented on historical genealogies related to British self-interest. *Henry V's* culminating moments at Agincourt (1415) resound with the triumphal rhetoric of enacted power—remember that the English were fighting in France, a country they had invaded long before they got to India.

Multiple Shakespeare plays compulsively examine historical figures in whom the aphrodisiac of power leads to compelling tragedy, from *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* to *Coriolanus*, *Timon of Athens*, and *King*

Lear. Which is to say that spectacles of power and national self-interest are familiar bedmates in both Shakespearean theatre and the political contexts out of which that theatre was created at a key historical moment linked to the founding of the British Empire. When the first version of the Globe Theatre burned to the ground in 1613 it was as a result of a special effects cannon fired during a performance of *Henry VIII* that set fire to the theatre's thatched roof. The moment exemplifies the high irony in which the Shakespearean "can(n)on" operates. The spectacle of a theatre consumed by cannon fire is linked to the spectacle of a nation whose military and trade prowess were given voice in literary works with unparalleled global canonical worth. Which can(n)on is more real? Where does Shakespearean theatrical spectacle end and the spectacle of Elizabethan power and *realpolitik* begin? Or are the two so thoroughly interwoven that the burning of the Globe by a cannon makes some sort of perfect, though twisted, sense: a spectacle consumed by the very symbolic object (power) it so tenaciously takes as its main interest? Shakespearean theatrical spectacle, then, cannot be easily detached from the spectacles of power that are so frequently its subject matter and inspiration. And Shakespearean theatre, as a staging ground for bloody power plays and corporate, imperial self-interest, achieved historical presence as similar legal entities at virtually the same historical moment in European, and specifically British, history.

So what?

Well, the long answer to that question is beyond this essay. But the short answer is simple: Shakespeare made it his business to talk about power and history and did so at a historical moment when the "play" of theatre imitated and anticipated the "play" of empire. Upstart Crow, wittily engages with this dynamic via parody in which Shakespearean history as blood sport is diffused through the lens of a distinctively Canadian perspective. The underlying logic of what Upstart Crow does depends on understanding that sport has today morphed into a theatrical spectacle of power: from the overpaid celebrity athletes on up through the corporate superstructures that make billions from their labours, through to the various media that make even more money from sports enterprises, the multi-billion dollar gambling industries that wager on sports events and, last but not least, the massive global audiences that absorb the values disseminated through all these sports-related structures. Professional sports have taken centre stage while theatre has fallen to the periphery of widely disseminated cultural work, with the possible exception of that unparalleled theatrical "athlete," William Shakespeare. And Upstart Crow, quite sensibly, plays out this inexorable logic on the fringes of professional theatre all the while that it spoofs Shakespeare, professional sports, and the high seriousness of professional theatre. No small feat!

Fringe theatre too often gets short shrift for its peripheral relationship to the imagined “centre” of the arts and theatre industries. Part of the reason for this is that experimentation, edginess, lack of resources, and the topicality of scripts go hand-in-hand in fringe productions, which is frequently not the case in more main-stage theatres, where patrons, advertising, and selling seats via crashing-chandelier type spectacles are the prime directive—as they are in professional sports. Nonetheless there is a huge and flourishing scene of fringe theatre in Canada, from the Toronto Fringe, through to the Montreal, Winnipeg, Regina and Edmonton fringe festivals, the latter being the largest fringe festival in North America. Canadian fringe festivals have assimilated the principles established by the first Fringe Festival established at the periphery of the Edinburgh International Festival in 1947. These principles advocated providing “all artists, emerging and established, with the opportunity to produce their play no matter the content, form or style, and to make the event as affordable and accessible as possible for the members of the community.” Fringe theatre, from my own perspective as someone fascinated by the general lack of attention paid in Canada to archiving our unique cultural heritage, especially so for the ephemera of theatre performances, is important for another reason. Fringe theatre, perhaps the most ephemeral form of an already ephemeral art, stages and reiterates the relation of center to periphery, and is empowered in all sorts of interesting ways as a result. Upstart Crow’s wickedly satirical and over-the-top hyper-theatricality on the edges permits the kind of forceful critique of taking the centre too seriously that is part of their theatrical ethos and an important part of Canada’s theatrical past.

Sending up pretentiousness is no small achievement and part of a long tradition in Canadian theatre that extends back to, for instance, Charles Moyses’s inspired attack on Shakespearean academics that take themselves too seriously in the parodic play, *Shakspeare's Skull and Falstaff's Nose: A Fancy in Three Acts* (1889). Moyses’s nineteenth-century spoof of Shakespearean pretensions is echoed in other Canadian adaptations that are part of the heritage to which Coculuzzi and Toner are indebted. Throughout their plays there’s the ghostly presence of another more famous Canadian adaptation of Shakespeare that satirically blended the Bard with sport. Legendary Canadian comedy duo, Wayne and Shuster, created a 1958 TV skit called “The Shakespearean Baseball Game.” Wayne and Shuster, it should be remembered, had made it big on the Ed Sullivan show in 1958 by performing another Shakespearean skit called “Rinse the Blood Off My Toga”—and went on to appear on the show a record 67 times. Based on the Shakespeare craze associated with the Stratford Festival’s founding in 1953, the beginning of Wayne and Shuster’s baseball sketch announces its location as “Bosworth Field (A Baseball Stadium Near Stratford),” an allusion to the final scene in *Richard III*, which was the first performed play at Stratford’s

inaugural season in 1953, with Alec Guinness starring as Gloucester. Similarly, in *Shakespeare's NHL (National History League)*, played in the Central Tech Parking lot in Toronto in 2005, Coculuzzi and Toner, riff on the TV show *Hockey Night in Canada*, a Canadian national addiction, and adapt its famous opening lines to Shakespearean history: "From coast to coast, this is hockey night in England. Good evening hockey fans. We're here at Westminster Arena where Richard's Rangers are playing Bolingbroke's Bruins..." So even as the Shakespeare effect's power was being demonstrated in the improbable story of Stratford's founding in the early 50s, Canadian comics continued the work of ridiculing high-art delusions and pretensions via distinctively Canadian contexts. Coculuzzi's and Toner's work carries on this tradition using the principles and contexts of fringe theatre to achieve their comic effects.

Fringe theatre, as envisioned by Upstart Crow, operates out of principles founded on local community, ensemble interaction, affordability, fun, accessibility, freedom from censorship, and the freedom to critique. These are the bywords of Upstart Crow's Shakespearean adaptations, which bring together large numbers of actors in productions that parody the dual preoccupation that Canadians seem to have with live sports and the canonical worth of Shakespeare. Parody functions as a lynch pin that allows for sporty updates to Shakespeare, even as both sport and the sport of making Shakespeare are subverted. Modern-day sport finds its roots in the bloody spectacle of the Roman circus, and history is an ongoing blood sport that is also a spectacle. Coculuzzi's and Toner's adaptations cleverly link these ideas via the spectacle of a theatre that makes these relations transparent. The sport of theatre, in short, is the sport of history, the sport of sports.

In *Shakespeare's Rugby Wars*, for instance, an adaptation of Shakespeare's Wars of the Roses tetralogy, Coculuzzi and Toner have Shakespeare as a referee, an apt role for the playwright in the "game" of rugby, and no less than Falstaff colour commentating with a sharp eye to what will boost ratings. At the same time, the play riffs on Canadian scion and politician Belinda Stronach's political defection from the Tories to the Liberals in 2005, the power dynamics of governance being figured in the sports analogy, of course; jokes about basketball star Michael Jordan's short-lived attempt to play minor league baseball in the context of Richard III's supposed assassination of the never-crowned Edward V, here done away with by a whack from Richard's baton, another history as blood sport analogy; and brings together, in a bravura display of adaptive chutzpah, the historical figures of Christopher Marlowe, Raphael Holinshed, and Robert Greene, the jealous playwright who had called Shakespeare an "upstart crow" in 1592 for having dared to take up the profession of writer. Othello, in *Shakespeare's World Cup*, laments how Desdemona "lov'd me for the footballs I had pass'd," a post-O.J. Simpson/Nicole Brown Simpson/Ronald

Goldman murder trial comment that resonates with the irony of celebrity use-value and racial politics. Othello is refigured here as the black sports hero whose status as object of desire arises from his sports skill, a canny rewriting of his martial prowess in terms of sports. Let's not forget that "sport" in the Elizabethan sense also meant erotic play, a context that further deepens the resonances of the adapted line from *Othello*.

But the word "sport" in Shakespeare's own plays has rather interesting further connotations, including: diversion, pastime, pleasure, out-of-door diversion (like hunting), a game of hazard, amorous dalliance, jest (as opposed to earnestness), contemptuous mockery, self-amusement, making merry, and most importantly, a play or theatrical performance, as in *King Henry VI, Part 1, 2.2* when Burgundy says "I see our wars / will turn unto a peaceful comic sport, / When ladies crave to be encounter'd with." Upstart Crow fully engages with these diverse meanings and recognizes the deep history that links theatre in Shakespeare to sport, amusement, dalliance, and hazard—and all of these to the spectacles of power that find their entertainment, and perhaps even some of their deeper meaning, in theatrical play. These plays invite readings and performances that engage with the rich cultural contexts they invoke in the spirit of mockery, critique, and an abiding sense of what it means to "sport."

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