Adapting the Bard: A Virtual Guide

Canadian Shakespeare festival web sites bring the Bard to media-savvy audiences.

by JENNIFER AILLES

Home Page

Adaptations of Shakespeare's works occur in a variety of locations, one of the primary being the theatrical festivals dedicated to the Bard. Situated across Canada, these festivals — from Bard on the Beach in Vancouver to the Shakespeare by the Sea Festival in St. John's — provide a variety of audiences with access to live performances of versions of Shakespeare's works. To keep up with and attract media-savvy audiences, the festivals have had to create web sites to help advertise their productions. These web sites range from simplistic, low-graphic virtual "posters" to highly detailed sites with animation and extensive menus linking to numerous sub-pages. These web sites, though, are not just advertisements for theatre. With common features such as links to merchandise, memberships, and local tourist attractions mixed in among company histories, play summaries, and production photos, the festival web sites go beyond advertising and raise questions about the role(s) of the Web in relation to the production and reception of Shakespearean adaptations in Canada. Specifically, the overall construction of the festival web sites, particularly their opening home pages, frame the image of each festival as a locus of more or less authentic "Shakespeare." The sites, as a whole, stress that they are bringing the cultural capital of the Bard to their audiences. What the virtual ads do not always express, to the same degree, is the adaptive nature of the Shakespearean product on offer and that the Bard, even in a traditional staging, is never presented unmediated. Since it is impossible to recreate a Shakespearean text as it was originally presented, any performance of Shakespeare's works, however slightly altered, is necessarily an adaptation.

Through the conjunction of commercial and theatrical rhetoric, along with on-line imagery, the festival sites depict the kind of Shakespeare that they perform and the extent to which they deem their work to be adaptive. The web sites classify an assortment of adaptive presentations ranging from loose interpretations and radical rewritings to strict stagings that alter little of Shakespeare's words and presumed settings. Furthermore, each web site reinforces the reality that the web is an adaptive performative space of its own that adds a critical dimension to the festival productions. Arguably, the performances of the Shakespearean adaptations, for those who come to the festivals via their web sites, begin not on the stage but on-line.

In the remainder of this paper I will surf through the various web sites of the Canadian Shakespearean festivals, briefly examining the Shakespearean product put forward and the extent to which the festivals embrace their adaptive natures, as well as noting some of the ways they initiate their seasonal performances on-line.

Victoria Shakespeare Festival

Run by Theatre Inconnu, Victoria Shakespeare Festival is situated in Victoria, British Columbia. Led by artistic director Clayton Jevne, the Festival's emphasis on adaptations of Shakespeare is clearly established on the festival's web site, which states that the festival's mandate "is to offer accessible and affordable renditions of Shakespeare's plays and other classics to audiences of all ages!" Accessibility to the Bard and other playwrights is extended beyond the stage to the virtual audience through the simple, uncluttered web site.

Though there are no summaries of the plays offered in the 2002 season on the web site, the forthcoming performances are nonetheless initiated on-line by the overall framing of the company as "Victoria's longest surviving alternative theatre company." Classifying the Festival as an "alternative" space where the audience is forewarned and/or promised an experience void of "international stars ... massive sets [or] special effects," the on-line audience's expectations of the adaptations to be presented are contrasted with their previous experiences of the Bard. Often these previous encounters are tied to studying the plays formally in high school and are frequently accompanied by watching big-budget cinematic adaptations and/or traditional stagings led by canonical stars who have solidified their names by performing Shakespeare on and off stage (the names of Sir Alec Guinness, Kenneth Branagh and Christopher Plummer, among many others, come to mind).
The audience’s expectations of the performative experience are further constructed by the site’s rhetoric, which draws the isolated patron at their computer into the regional community of the province, city and the theatre itself where they have,

in keeping with the charm of British Columbia’s historic capital city ... been quietly entertaining tens of thousands of theatre lovers ... who return year after year to re-experience this most unpretentious and exciting experience of the greatest drama and comedy in the English language.

While stressing the “unpretentious[ness]” of the experience, the Festival’s web site also avoids alienating anyone who is after a seemingly more traditional projection of Shakespeare by emphasizing the Festival’s “quiet[ness].”

**Bard on the Beach**

Also on the West Coast of Canada, and run a bit more noisily than the Victoria Shakespeare Festival, is Vancouver’s Bard on the Beach. Run by artistic director Christopher Gaze, the festival’s highly detailed web site, with extensive links to production photos and performance synopses, negates any overt notion that the performances are adaptations. There is no explicit adaptive rhetoric that names the festival as an “alternative” space. Instead, the “Brief History” of the festival included on the web site states that the festival “was established in 1990 with a mandate to provide Vancouver residents and tourists with affordable, accessible Shakespearean productions of the finest quality.” The Shakespeare on offer twelve years later, though, seems to be concerned with attracting audience numbers more than enhancing “quality”: the home page lauds its attendance numbers in bold: “Over 65,000 attended performances in 2001. Thank you for the best season ever!” The competitive tone is reinforced and extended to the on-line audience as web-users are reminded several times to “order [their] tickets early” so that they can be included in the growing number of visitors — possibly beating the “record-breaking 97.3% of capacity” achieved by the 2001 audience.

In order to draw more people to the 2002 season, Bard on the Beach decidedly begins its performances online. Each of the plays is provided with graphical representations, brief summaries and production details that posit a particular reading of the adaptation. For example, under *Henry V*, along with visual images, the festival includes a map of “The Battle of Agincourt” and the lyrics to “The Agincourt Carol.” Providing these details is more akin to the information provided in scholarly editions of the plays, which similarly ground the Web audience in a more specific reading of these productions long before they venture to the festival itself. Even if the on-line audience never attends Bard on the Beach they will have an initial understanding of the quality of the adaptations presented. The festival’s performances are structured further through the inclusion of “Archives” that list all past performances. Though at the time of my visit it was still under construction, this section of the site will eventually provide the on-line audience with detailed production information from past seasons that will further frame the current and future performances by showing the range of adaptations presented at the festival.

Beyond the number-crunching and the performative on-line shaping of the plays, Bard on the Beach features the most explicit example of the Web as an adaptive performative space. Following a link on the site to “Special Events,” the on-line audience can “Preview the Bard Fireworks Special.” Complete with sound effects, the preview displays computerized fireworks exploding over a multicoloured version of the festival’s multicoloured tent logo. This on-line production hints at the Web’s potential to be an extension and/or replacement of the traditional stage environment — in effect, it becomes an adaptive performance “space” that supplants or challenges the dominance of more traditional theatrical spaces.

**Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan Festival**

The cartoon-tent graphic of the Bard on the Beach on-line logo transforms into a photograph of real performance tents on the home page of “The Award Winning Shakespeare.on the Saskatchewan Festival,” whose artistic director is Mark von Eschen. The emphasis on the “award-winning Shakespeare” presented at the Festival draws on the prestige and elitism that awards often invoke. The sense of prestige is echoed in the Festival’s web site through its “Executive Summary and History” and its exclusiveness as “Saskatchewan’s only professional summer theatre organization.” The Festival has also earned the nation-building stamp of approval from Attractions Canada, which names Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan as “one of Attraction’s Canada’s ‘Just Stay Home’ contest destinations.”

The evocation of elite culture is quickly tempered by the site’s explicit statement that “the Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan Festival is not museum piece theatre.” Furthermore, the site explains that the productions thrrob with life. Sometimes the setting is Elizabethan, sometimes not. *Hamlet*, for example, was presented in a world of the future in which violence was the language of politics and Hamlet’s isolation was plain to see. On the other hand, *The Tempest* was in a customary Elizabethan setting. We try to present the plays in the setting that will most vividly bring them to life. Every summer, the Festival tents rise upon the banks of the South Saskatchewan River. There is beauty and joy. Spontaneity of a passionate evening awaits the audience.

The “passion” and “spontaneity” that make the Festival’s adaptations of Shakespeare’s works “throb with life” is also graphically inscribed into their web site via...
the cartoon icons of the menu and the Festival’s logo, which present a black and white Bard wearing sunglasses against a vibrant red background and Festival title. The Shakespeare presented at this Festival is cool, hip and fully adaptive to multiple settings.

Demonstrating success in a variety of locations, the Festival’s awards reveal its ability to bring Shakespeare to both on-site and on-line audiences. According to the award listings, which make no distinction between awards for the web site and those given to the Festival, the Festival received a “Best of the Web Gold Award,” and was named “A Netwired Webcenter APPROVED site” and a “Saskatchewan Tournet Approved Web Site.” The site also boasts a “JAYDE Gold Diamond Award” that states that the festival

houses the most exciting Shakespeare company anywhere ... [sic] the company puts on the most original productions of Shakespeare’s works in North America, putting the Bard’s works in contemporary settings and situations.

The amalgamation of praise for both the web site and for the festival demonstrates the slipperiness of the line between virtual and actual performative spaces and their growing interdependence in contemporary Canadian culture.

York Shakespeare Festival

The performative authenticity evoked by the photo of the tents in the Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan Festival home page is emphasized to an even greater extent on the web site for the newest Shakespearean festival in the country: the York Shakespeare Festival. Proclaiming itself “[t]he only Shakespeare-in-a-Tent Experience in Ontario,” the festival is located in Newmarket, Ontario, and is run by the Resurgence Theatre Company (the RTC as opposed to the RSC) under the artistic direction of Lee Wilson. The mandate of the “professional, non-profit theatre company ... is to resurge the classics and ignite new and contemporary works while utilizing the surging energy of young and established artists alike.”

This belief that Shakespeare’s works are in need of “resurg[ing]” with the “energy of youth,” echoed on several of the other festival web sites, is given particular institutional support on the York Shakespeare Festival’s site. The initial details for the 2002 season listed on the site proclaim that the festival has just been “awarded a four year operating grant in the amount of $180,000 from the Ontario Trillium Foundation to expand the Festival from one production over four weeks to two productions over six weeks.” The growth and performative development that the Ontario government’s sponsorship allows is replicated on the Festival’s web site, which is under construction. The home page features the photo of a brightly costumed fool and links to an older version of the site, which contains extensive production details of the initial seasons. As with the other festival web sites, the archival information sets up the on-line audience’s performative expectations of the current and future season’s adaptations.

A Company of Fools

Though not strictly a festival, A Company of Fools features more Shakespearean content than many of the self-proclaimed festivals (as Jessica Schaefer’s essay in this issue of CTR shows). Led by artistic director Scott Florence, the company’s web site calls the Fools “Ottawa’s Premiere Shakespearean Performance Company.” The web site shares a similar structure with the Shakespearean festival sites, but the Fools’ self-acknowledged adaptive “Foolishness” effuses much more explicitly throughout the tongue-in-cheek site, which also offers “Fool-o-Grams!” and a “Shakespearean Sonnet Delivery for all occasions!” The web site extends this performative playfulness to embrace the “dot-com” frenzy by including a link to the “Last Page” on the Internet where they give the on-line audience instructions to “turn off [their] computer and go outside and play;” thereby ending the virtual performance.

Following the Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan Festival, the Fools do not produce “museum piece theatre.” The rhetoric of the company’s web site goes beyond Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan and the York Shakespeare Festival’s “resurg[ing] of the classics” to forefront its adaptive focus even more blatantly. The site states that

for more than thirteen years ... A Company of Fools has been performing the works of William Shakespeare like you’ve never seen them before. Fun, fast and furious, the Fools brand of physical theatre brings the bard to life. Whether you’d consider yourself a Shakespeare snob or even if you despise the very name of Shakespeare, you’ll find something to like about the unique style of the Fools as we move the bard off the page and into your hearts.
Directly addressing an issue at the heart of adaptive theory, the discourse underlying the explicit need to "bring the bard to life" through performative reformations calls upon an authoritative, original Shakespeare that can be "move[d] ... off the page." This need for a solidified Bard is also implicit in the assumption that the on-line audience has had past experiences with Shakespearean productions that have left him far away from their "hearts." The Fools' attempt to counter web-users' preconceived notions of Shakespearean adaptations begins with the company's web site, which is always already performing even when the company's actors are at rest.

Shakespeare by the Sea Festival

The initial home page of the Shakespeare by the Sea Festival, whose artistic director is Jennifer Deon, reveals a photo of the festival's St. John's Cabot 500 Theatre. Directly below this opening image is a web counter that lists the cumulative number of visitors to the page (over 7,300 since July 1999). The web counter is reminiscent of Bard on the Beach's exclamations of their overwhelming 2001 attendance and the Victoria Shakespeare Festival's more subtle counting of their "tens of thousands of theatre lovers." With each visit, the virtual audience members are tracked as if they had purchased a ticket to the virtual performance.

The performative expectations of the on-line audience are thoroughly shaped by the web site's primary sub-page to centre on the local and ecological adaptations of Shakespeare's works. Topped by a black and white image of deep waves rolling over the festival logo, the sub-page exclaims that this is "North America's most easterly Shakespeare festival." The graphic, along with archival production photos, visually emphasizes the Festival's mandate "to be inspired by and maintain the integrity of the natural and/or pre-existing surroundings" of "unique Newfoundland venues in and around the St. John's area."

Echoing both the York and the Victoria Shakespeare Festivals, the web site states that the Festival "does not boast a roster of international stars ... massive sets and special effects." As a Shakespearean festival, the Stratford Festival as the producer of "museum piece theatre" that does "boast a roster of international stars ... massive sets and special effects." As a Shakespearean festival, the Stratford Festival is the unacknowledged original that the majority of the other Shakespearean festivals work to subvert through their blatantly altered adaptations and the rhetoric of their representations.

The Stratford Festival of Canada

In direct contrast to the local and community-specific Shakespearean adaptations produced by the Shakespeare on the Sea Festival, the Stratford Festival of Canada, celebrating its fiftieth season in 2002, is posited as the most canonical, seemingly most authentic and universal locus of Shakespearean production in Canada. The Festival's web site, though, reveals that Shakespeare is not the Festival's primary concern. The semiotics of the site tend to negate the festival's connection to the Bard, let alone acknowledge the adaptive nature of the productions on the multiple theatre stages. Going to the Stratford Festival, according to the web site, is about going to Stratford rather than going to see Shakespeare. Most tellingly, it is artistic director Richard Monette's name that is a part of the ever-present logo emblazoned at the top left corner of the web site, not Shakespeare's.

Representing less than half the Festival's productions, the Shakespearean adaptations offered are initiated on-line. In conjunction with the detailed descriptions of the Festival, Avon, Tom Patterson and the new Studio Theatres, the plays' summaries solidify the Stratford Festival as the producer of "museum piece theatre" that does "boast a roster of international stars ... massive sets and special effects." As a Shakespearean festival, the Stratford Festival is the unacknowledged original that the majority of the other Shakespearean festivals work to subvert through their blatantly altered adaptations and the rhetoric of their representations.

Further Links

While the Stratford Festival of Canada web site seems to be actively de-stressing the performance of Shakespeare, the other Shakespearean festival web sites, including A Company of Fools, actively promote the production of Shakespearean adaptations in Canada. As these on-line advertisements are accessible worldwide, the varying adaptive rhetorics, as well as the often unspoken energies that inform them, reach well beyond the geographic boundaries of the country. As the performative space of the Web is embraced and explored, the festival web sites will have the opportunity to move beyond the on-line framing and initiating of their stage productions in order to use the Web as a primary performative space in conjunction with and/or as a replacement of the traditional theatrical spaces.

The downside of this broadening reliance on the Web to advertise, draw tourists, promote communities, perform and contextualize adaptations is the amount of energy and capital it takes to sustain the web sites and keep them up to date and on-line. Several of the festivals rely on
the goodwill of volunteer webmasters to maintain their sites and cannot afford the significant investment of resources needed to fully engage in the technological and innovative performative possibilities of the Web. At risk, too (when a web site is down) is the festival’s on-line audience, who may only know or have access to the festival through the performative space of the site. As a case in point, a discussion of the festival web site for Shakespeare by the Sea, in Halifax, Nova Scotia – which is alive and well – is noticeably missing from this paper, as their web site was off-line for a significant amount of time in the fall of 2001 through to the end of this study.

The Web is a transient space. Once information that was originally posted on a site goes off-line, or is significantly updated, it is lost in the same manner that Shakespeare’s original stage productions are gone forever. In that sense, the Web is truly a performative and adaptive space since all we are left with are fleeting alterations to a once original performative posting. CTR

Note

1 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in a particular section are from the corresponding festival’s web site. All web sites visited – with URLs and dates of access – are listed below in the Works Cited.

Works Cited


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