

ACTORS' ROUNDTABLE

Actors' Roundtable Acting during COVID-19: What Shakespeare Actors Did During the Pandemic to Survive

Michael Don Bahr
USF Education Director

Featuring: Quinn Mattfeld, Betsy Mugavero, and
René Thornton, Jr.

Bahr: Welcome. What a fabulous morning and fabulous yesterday we've had thus far. I really enjoyed our last panel and many of the comments made by the last panel. The last paper, Kasen's paper, I think will tie in well with what we are talking about here. The Wooden O Symposium has always had a panel where we celebrate and archive the productions that the festival is doing here. Many times, when we are doing an obscure piece such as *Troilus and Cressida*—although it's not so obscure for you René. I think you've done four of those, right? Anytime we are featuring obscure plays, I like that to essentially be the show we talk about. We got a chance last year to talk about *Hamlet*. We had a *Hamlet* panel, and that was pretty historic and important. We also in the last panel talked about Russia and Russian influences. I would have enjoyed seeing that set during the time of Nicholas II. We also felt that *The Book of Will* was a very important show last year and so we did that as well.

Those of you that have been at the festival before may recognize these actors, but there are many of you who are not within the region that the Utah Shakespeare Festival resides in and you may not know where these actors come from. The first thing we are going to do are introductions, and then we're going to focus on three things.

Hang onto your hats; we are going to be here for an hour and a half, but it will be very exciting. We are going to spend probably the first twenty minutes talking a little bit about what the pandemic has done to them and the type of work that they've done during the pandemic and the type of work that they've put together, and also what it has done to them, but I'd also like to talk to them about adaptation. We are very fortunate to have three equity actors who have a lot of experience with Shakespeare and his work. We just did a virtual seminar a couple weeks ago with René, who has performed in every single play in the Shakespeare canon. And I know that both Betsy and Quinn have also performed a lot of Shakespeare's plays.

They know him well, so the second twenty minutes we're going to focus a little bit on what it's like to adapt Shakespeare in the many ways that you can adapt Shakespeare as well. Then we will open it up to questions from our participants here as well, but for now so that the audience can get to know you, I would love for you to introduce yourself. Tell us a about your career, where you worked etc., and then we'll launch in with a pandemic question. Let's start with Quinn, then René, and then Betsy. Go ahead Quinn.

Mattfield: Hi, I'm Quinn Mattfeld. I would have been out at the Utah Shakespeare Festival for, I believe it would have been my tenth season had we done it this summer. I grew up in the Northwest. I went to school at the University of Oregon, then I went to Penn State. After that, I moved to New York, bounced around, did some theater in New York, and then did my first season at the Utah Shakespeare Festival in 2009, where I met my wife, and from there I went to LA. I became a resident company member of the Pacific Conservatory for the Performing Arts in Santa Maria. After that, I went on a national tour with *Matilda the Musical* playing the evil, TV-obsessed father, Mr. Wormwood. After that I went back to New York and did another and have been

at the festival off and on since then. When I went back to New York most recently, I had been both a director and a playwright and I went out to the Southwest Shakespeare company to be one of the co-artistic directors there. I got to direct a number of shows and decide on seasons and actually had a play produced out there and was going to have another one. Michael do you want to talk about what has happened as a response to the pandemic?

Bahr: Let's just do introductions so we know where we are all speaking from and then I'm going to talk about what happened and you can talk about Southwest Shakes.

Mattfeld: Great! So now I've moved to Pennsylvania so you can imagine where the story about the job goes, but I was an artistic director for about three years in Arizona, the southwest Shakespeare company, and I'll hand it off to René.

Thornton: Hi everyone, my name is René Thornton, Jr. I am originally from New York City. I, too, would have been back at the Utah Shakespeare Festival for my fifth season, I believe. I was there last summer and it had been about seventeen years before that since my previous three seasons. I am currently a company member with the resident ensemble players at the University of Delaware. We are actually on summer break, but in three weeks we will be back to work. The bulk of my career I spent at the American Shakespeare Center. I was there for almost fourteen years and that is where I have done a lot of Shakespeare.

Mugavero: Hi, I'm Betsy Mugavero. I am originally from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. I went to Temple University for undergrad and then went to the University of California Irvine for my MFA. This summer would have been my eleventh season in Cedar City. I started in 2008, and have had a really fun time on the stage there. I am super sad not to be there right now with all of you. I have worked at Idaho Shakespeare, the Folger Theater in DC, and the Great Lakes Theater in Cleveland. Most recently I was the co-artistic director at Southwest Shakespeare Company in Mesa, Arizona with Quinn Mattfeld, and now I am in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, returning to my roots.

Bahr: Fantastic. It is an honor to have you here. Let's jump straight in to talking about the pandemic. I want to make sure that for history and for the archives that we can talk about not only the good that comes out of a pandemic, but also what the pandemic

did to us. So, I'm going to start with—where were you? What did the pandemic do to the contracts that you had and to the projects that you were starting on? Let's start with Betsy, then René, and then Quinn.

Mugavero: Well, I was in rehearsal for *Hudson The Musical*, which was a musical written by Quinn Mattfeld and Danny Tieger about Henry Hudson, the explorer. We actually had the stage reading performed at Utah Shakes for *Words Cubed* last year, if anyone was able to see it. It was really great and such a fun learning experience for us and we were ready to launch it in April in Mesa. We were a week into rehearsals with a fabulous cast and a great group of collaborators and they cancelled the MBA and we thought, “ugh, um, I don't think we're going to be able to do our play.” I think it came as a shock to everyone that we weren't going to continue, but we also had members of our team say privately “Thank you. I feel like I'm putting myself at risk everyday by leaving my home and coming here. I have family members who are immunocompromised.” That really made our decision to cancel the production feel very validated—we were protecting our community.

From there, the company had to move completely to an online platform, which I'm sure we will get into, and without revenue streams coming in, without donations coming in, it is really hard to sustain the staff. And, as I'm sure many of you have seen, all over the country theaters are making huge, huge cuts to their staff, and unfortunately at Southwest Shakes, Quinn and I were both furloughed indefinitely. Because we don't have a crystal ball to see what will happen next, we decided to pick up and move to be closer to family, which was extremely important for me because this is obviously an extremely emotional time losing not only that important part of my life but then the news of Utah's Shakespeare Festival not being able to proceed. We just decided, okay, let's just be near family and take a break.

Thornton: So, the company I worked with, the REP, had just done the opening weekend and two student matinees of a production of *The Crucible*, in which I was playing John Proctor. After our last student matinee, we learned that there had been a COVID case on campus the day before, so campus got shut down. That was the last time I stepped inside a theater. That was in early

March. Part of my job at the REP also includes teaching class at the University of Delaware, so fortunately we still had class to get us through the rest of the semester. Our company was financially in a position to honor everyone's contracts through the end of the season, which would have been May. Now is the summer when we would have been off anyway.

Bahr: Quinn, anything to add about what happened with Southwest and your other roles?

Mattfield: My story is pretty much similar to Betsy's story. This was going to be the premier of a show that I had been working on since I had been on tour with a friend of mine, Danny Tieger. We had a reading of it at Words Cubed, the program at the Utah Shakespeare Festival, and Betsy was directing it. It was going to open there and then go up to the Lyric Repertory Company in Logan, so it was going to be this really cool spring/summer, doing two different versions of the show. We were in the middle of rehearsal and somebody looked at their phone and said, "the MBA just canceled their season." I remember that very distinctly and I remember thinking "this is all over, isn't it?" And because we are actors and directors, and that work can't be done right now, we are sort of doing odd jobs. I am actually trying to see if I can tailor my skill set to something else, so right now I'm looking for copyrighting work and writing work, going from the very available career of the theater to the very available career of a writer.

Bahr: Let's talk about that, because you all kind of pivoted very quickly. There were a couple of Zoom online performances spoken about a little bit, and I know all of you have been involved in Zoom performances and also part of ensembles. René, I know you've been involved in that type of stuff, too. And Betsy has been in trainings and workshops, too. Talk about the pivot. What type of work were you able to do and put together, and how did those processes work?

Mugavero: I was going to say that we had quite a few productions at Southwest Shakes go online live, recorded readings of Shakespeare plays that were really successful, and I think it was just really fun for people to listen from home and see their favorite actors. That is still going on with Southwest and other companies and I encourage you all to tune in when you can because it is a way to see some theater.

Because of all of the experience that we are getting on Zoom and communicating in this way, watching the school systems making decisions about what their platforms will be for the upcoming school year, Quinn and I decided to help by making our own little unit of a theater company in Pennsylvania. It could be national if somebody was inclined to ask us. We put together a little package for educators that we are familiar with in the area and said, "Look, we can teach Shakespeare; we can make Marie Curie's Nobel Prize speech come alive for you. We can do anything with a sliding scale. We just really want to help and give the students access to other voices and other perspectives, so we are willing to help with Shakespeare, English, math, science, whatever you need in order to assist educators and students alike, especially since we can just Zoom in."

Mattfield: Because the conventions of the theater shifted over to a virtual world and because we moved over to Zoom, Betsy and I then collaborated on making a couple of videos. People had asked us for instructional videos for public speaking, one was fitness instructors, one was literally how to do Zoom, tips for Zoom. We had made a couple of those.

I created my own little desk late night piece, which is called *This Dumb Week*. You can find it on YouTube and I do it every week. It is just me talking about whatever I'm reading in the newspaper.

We are also devising a two-person *Christmas Carol* right now, so the creative juices haven't stopped flowing. It's just like when you run water through the maze and you close one door; the water is going to run somewhere else. It is just a matter of that.

What is really interesting is that it reminds you of what it is that is unique and so valuable about the theater—about everybody being in the same room together. There are ways for us to approximate it and to be on Zoom and to connect with one another, but that is still an individual experience, similar to television and film, where you watch and have your own intimate experience. Whereas, in the theater we all have that collective experience together—we are all moving with the story together, and I think that is something that we very much miss and we probably will go back, but until that time, we just have to find ways to create and to see if we can adapt to the circumstances.

Bahr: René, tell me about what I'm going to call your pivot point. What happened in your pivot and what happened in the communities that you were working with?

Thornton: Well, the silver lining, such as it is, was that I was then available for projects that I would not have otherwise been available for, and so I've been super fortunate. I've done seven virtual readings so far and I have an eighth one next week. I've done three panels and recorded a children's book. So I've been able to work with one company that is based out of London, another one has folks from Athens, and another was with Southwest Shakes. So, access to participation in creating things with people that I would otherwise not have been able to spend time with has been great, but to be clear, though that sounds like a lot to do, there has also been plenty of me curled up in the corner crying and missing my life, missing the world, and missing my job. I have been fortunate that there has been some work to do, but it is still, as Quinn would say, not the same.

Bahr: Before we leave the pandemic world, I want you to think about this question. Is there anything that this medium taught you about the medium and the work that you wouldn't have learned otherwise in front of an audience?

Mattfield: I think there is something actually. When you're doing Zoom readings, you are in an audience, you are hearing. It is an auditory medium, especially Shakespeare. You used to go and hear a play, that's the way they would say it, let's go hear a play, and that is the way they used to write about it and talk about it. Going to take in a play was actually an auditory experience. There is something about this when you are doing Shakespeare and it is just you and the words.

Certainly, I don't think this medium does it better because it still has to be translated into, I don't know, I don't understand computers, I assume it is binary code, and then back out to actual sound. It's not the vibration of sound going from my mouth to your ear, but there is still something about going in your own kind of world, speaking and listening to this writer and this particular format, this artist. Again, I don't know that it's better, but there is something very interesting about that individual experience of being able to just sit and listen to a play that has been valuable in a way, to reduce it in a weird way to what is essential. It is essential

that I heard these words. That is a unique experience and it is something that both theater and this virtual experience have.

Babr: Other comments, René or Betsy.

Thornton: I can't think of anything off the top of my head that I have learned necessarily about the text during this time. I have been experimenting with how we can use this medium innovatively. The first Zoom reading that I did was very still and quiet and direct—more like TV/film. And so, what I'm interested in is how do we make this space more theatrical? What are the ways in which we play with the camera, in and out of the frame? Is there some element of that which can still maintain something that is more than what TV and film can do because otherwise, what is this medium? What are we offering? Are we doing anything that Netflix doesn't already offer?

Mattfield: That is a really great point, asking 'what is the theatricality of this medium' rather than 'this medium is like film or TV' or whatever. Betsy and I did a reading of this play called *Coleridge Interrupted*. There were all types of backdrops and people came in at weird angles. There were things that were sort of preplanned that we had to react to in the moment. The conventions were very unique to this medium, which I thought was kind of interesting.

Mugavero: I was going to say that it's still live, which is really interesting because of instead of it being live and you feeling the audience's energy coming back to you, you have to be a step braver, or brave in a different way, because you just have to trust that the joke will land or the emotion will fly through that tiny camera hole. You don't know. When we are on stage, as we've said before, in these kinds of panels and in actor talk backs, our brains are all over the place. We see the guy get up to go to the bathroom as we are saying a huge emotional soliloquy. Everything is observed by us when we are on stage. Everything our audience is doing is observed.

In this case, we cannot make any observations, but we have to trust that what we are delivering is meeting someone on the other side. I think what it has made me do is to use an acting technique I use when something distracting is happening in the audience when I'm live on stage. Instead of looking at the audience, I focus on my partner and I have to visualize my partner somehow in that

little camera hole. I can't make eye contact with Romeo. If I look here where Quinn is, I'm not looking at him, or it doesn't look like I'm looking at him, so I'm making my eye contact with the camera and I'm piercing through ZIP codes, time zones to wherever he is and I'm hoping that the energy is coming across. It requires a lot of effort and bravery to just go for it.

Mattfield: I was just thinking it is sort of like being a pitcher and you throw the ball, but then there is this huge sheet in front of where the batter and the catcher are and so you just have to go, "I think that was a pretty good throw." And you have no idea if they called a ball or a strike. But I know I threw it with good intention. It really is just a bizarre experience.

Bahr: René, did you have anything to add to that? I wasn't going to ask this question, but you can thank Betsy for this. I wasn't going to make it about acting lessons on Zoom—how to apply Meisner—but it does go back to your fundamentals, right? Your scene partners, which we know in Shakespeare is everyone, right? We know we're completely communicating with that audience. When you can't get them back, then you just bear down and try to get back to them, right?

Mattfield: When you are on stage, the stage is a very horizontal kind of experience. You are watching two halves of a conflict and there is usually internal conflict in that. Whereas, on film it is kind of a vertical thing, you know what I mean? Like you are the only one. So, in a way you kind of have to reflect both sides of the conflict and you'll see actors that are very, very good at it. You don't have to worry about how it looks or how you are necessarily representing that on stage because you have someone else who is doing that other part of the storytelling.

Bahr: Acting is storytelling.

Mattfield: Yeah, yeah, when it is just you, you do have to think a little bit about being not just the actor in the moment, but a little bit of the chorus reflecting the storyline that is happening as well, to get Greek about it.

Bahr: I am going to shift gears a little. We've got a great audience out there, and I see their names, which is fabulous. If there is anyone out there who has a question, feel free to jump in. You can either raise your hand or wave at me, or you can even put it in the chat because I will see it there. I trust the minds that are out there. There might be some great stuff you want to ask.

I am going to shift to the next question as we talk about adaptation because if this was another year, you three would be the greatest, most fantastic resources for Shakespeare adaptation. What do we do when we take Shakespeare and we make those productions here and how important is what Quinn brings to a role or René brings to a role or how Betsy shapes her performance? How important is the lens of the director?

It is so easy to think about and ask those questions when we've got an actual play that we are discussing. I just want you to think about every play that you've ever done as I ask this next question. It's the first day of rehearsal; you're coming into this space and you're ready to hear about the director's vision, or what the director wants to do. You've previously read the play and you're coming to the table here. What is the most valuable thing that you feel you bring to the table as an actor preparing to do that play?

Mugavero: I was just going to say that beyond the word Zoom, adaptation and adapting may be the word of this year. I feel like everyone on earth is "adapting" right now to a new situation, which is funny because that is what this panel is about. When I come into a first read and I learn the concept, I just want to say yes. I want to say to the director, yes, I'm here and I want to do that.

I may have had ideas for the character and what I think the story should be, but I love collaborating with a director and going "ooh, that changes the way that I think of my character and the way that I think of the relationships with the other characters in the play." So I like to adapt to someone else's idea because it opens things up for me.

Bahr: Adaptation, well done, that's great.

Thornton: I haven't thought this through, so I'm not entirely sure how it is going to sound, but, I think the most valuable thing that each of us brings to the table is ourselves. I think that for x, y, or z reasons I was given this role as opposed to the other people who could have been given this role, so you now have me, my physicality, my voice and experience, occupying this space. My job is to bring those things to the table for you to mold and shape and use as you see fit, and I find that is as true now as in the before times.

Bahr: Quinn?

Mattfield: I agree. If you watch Renée’s *Hamlet* and Betsy’s *Hamlet* and Quinn’s *Hamlet* they are going to be different *Hamlets*. They are just going to be by virtue of the fact that it’s different humans that are the prism through which the character is being projected. I think one of the things that I’m always trying to do when I come to a role or come to a show is to ask how do I take what is being given to me and try to make it even better. That’s what you are trying to do as an artist, too. The director is trying to look at the actor and discover what they’re doing and make the best version of that thing that they’re doing. I want to facilitate that.

For me, my goal is to be able to say, this is the director’s vision. This is the way they tell the story. This is what is interesting to them about this particular iteration of it or the story they want to tell. And then I can I think, “Okay great, how can I facilitate that through character, through whatever my particular smaller part of the larger story is?” Whether you are playing Hamlet or you’re playing spear carrier #2, you can facilitate that story. You may not be able to see this change through, but you can say, the cool thing about when I’m spear carrier #2 is I just get to reflect something. If I can kind of reflect something that is still me participating in the story and trying to augment it, make it better, to make it fuller. I think that is the thing that I find really valuable in actors as a director and also what I try to do as an actor.

Thornton: When we talk about adaptation of these plays, either now or in the before times, it is important to talk about the impact that costume designers have. Now in these Zoom play days, I have yet to work with a costume designer on a Zoom play. As Quinn was talking, I was thinking about the *Twelfth Night* we did at the festival last summer. I had, as we do, ideas about how Orsino might be before we showed up. Then when the costume had a long curly wig and a giant gold robe, I thought, “Okay, time to adapt, time to pivot, time to take that in.” In the real world there are so many different kinds of artisans who help create what we do, but now, in this Zoom space, a lot of that weight has been put back onto the actor’s shoulders.

Bahr: Anybody else have anything to say about that? I love what René said about collaboration. Theater is a collaborative art—director, actor, designer—with all those ideas coming

together to create the experience. So, if we are going to produce at this time, and we've actually heard some great panels about people who are playing in this arena, we must think, "How am I going to adapt? How am I going to give this pen over to Quinn?" There is a forced collaboration that you have to artificially create. Forced collaboration is there naturally when someone comes in and shows you the costume design, which you haven't seen in a normal process, and you go, "Oh, that's what I'm wearing." There are really rich elements to that kind of collaboration and there are collaborators through the whole process that you are engaging with, right? Any ideas on the importance of collaborators in the role of adaptation?

Mattfield: Yeah. You know, if you are going to try and direct, I keep using *Hamlet* because we are talking about it, but if you are going to try and direct Betsy as Hamlet, and you want her to do a René Hamlet, you are just going to end up being disappointed and you are going to end up frustrated with the actor because Betsy's never going to do the Hamlet of René, no offense Betsy, I'm sure you've got a great René Hamlet in there.

Mugavero: Challenge accepted.

Mattfield: Depending on who you cast, you're really asking for their collaboration and what they are going to bring to it. If I cast Denzel Washington because I really want him to do a Christopher Walken kind of performance, that just doesn't make any sense.

Bahr: I'm going to bring up *Richard II* because I know I can. René, what role did you play in *Richard II*?

Thornton: I played Thomas Mowbray and whatever Hotspur's name is before he is Hotspur.

Mattfield: Henry Percy.

Thornton: There we go, Henry Percy.

Bahr: Because sometimes talking about these concepts in the nebulous is not nearly as exciting as actually about talking about an actual play. I'd like to ask Betsy if you can talk a little bit about the journey you went on "adapting" *Richard II* and the all-female *Richard II* journey? I would like to have René bring some perspectives in on that as well.

Mugavero: So that was the last performance I was in, an all-female production of *Richard II* at Southwest Shakes directed by Quinn. It was extremely exciting to be a part of it. I didn't think

of it as this is how women play Richard, or any of these roles. We just came at them. We didn't change pronouns. We just were the characters and we told the story just as Shakespeare would have in his time, except it would've been all men.

I absolutely loved playing the role. I didn't hide my femininity. I also didn't play it up to make any kind of point. I just played the character as honestly and sincerely as I could, given the circumstances that he was in. I had no political agenda with this piece. We were thrilled that the audiences loved it and were accepting of this idea.

It was actually a very stripped-down production as well and we called it our Blackfriar series. We had candlelight and performed it on the front of the stage with a curtain behind us. It was a very small playing space and it was super intimate. After one of the performances, a woman came up to me and said "you did something to me tonight because I saw a woman as a king," and I hadn't considered that kind of impact. What my audience is seeing—because of my gender playing this role and not playing it with any kind of stamp of gender on it—just, as Quinn was saying earlier, by being myself, it was sending some kind of message to people and an impression that is very positive for them. It was a super rewarding experience for me.

Bahr: I know Quinn stepped out for a minute to take care of the baby. I would like you to talk a little bit about the director's position on this. Initially it was going to be an "all-female" production, and you had concerns, as a producer, about having a male director. Do you want to talk about that journey?

Mugavero: I did. I thought if it's going to be all-female it has to be all-female across the board. I actually spoke with one of Ren's former colleagues at American Shakespeare Center, Vanessa Morosco, who is a great theater artist, about this because she is a director and ideally a director I would love to have work on something like that with me.

She said, "You know when you have Quinn, or a male identifying person, directing an all-female production, it appears that he has chosen to do this and he has chosen these people to work with and these women to collaborate with and that is a really positive message. It means that now Betsy can direct an all-male production and no one will think anything of it. Just because you are a different gender doesn't mean you can't tell the story."

I think that is really positive, especially as we continue exploring gender equity, diversity, and inclusion, which is a huge topic right now and as a lot of companies are changing their mission statements and policies. We all get to collaborate, no matter what our backgrounds are or how we identify.

Bahr: René, I'm going to make a bridge here to a different production. Tell us about your *Richard II* production, not that the theme of this conference is *Richard II*, but we could think about it as adaptation and a king who can adapt, if you want to do that. We hadn't planned to talk about this play, but I think there are great lessons that can come from this, so please tell us about your production of *Richard II*.

Thornton: The production of *Richard II* that I did was at the American Shakespeare Center. As we did for all of the plays that we did at the American Shakespeare Center, there was gender cross casting, some women definitely played some male roles. Later they actually did a production with a female in the role of Richard, but I wasn't there for that. It was a fairly standard Blackfriar's production of a history play. There was nothing particularly groundbreaking about it, but we checked all of the appropriate *Richard II* boxes.

Bahr: We have a comment in the chat from Peggy Saunders.

Peggy[Audience Member]: People who come to the festival love having different people in the same role. This is what brings me back to USF year after year. I want to see those different interpretations and those adaptations. When we see a *Hamlet*, and those big ten Shakespeare plays that are very, very popular come popping up about every five years, we are able to see many of those same plays, but with different designers, different actors, and people in different roles. Can I just say I want to acknowledge what just happened there. That is one of the things I love about teaching in this time. Some people hate it; they'll say the camera is off and that type of stuff. I love that we are all intimate in everybody's houses. I love that we see dogs and cats and plants and bookshelves, and that we're all human beings here through this time.

Bahr: It's like cell phones in a classroom—I'll use them. WNYC hosted a Shakespeare in the Park production of *Richard II* with a primarily black cast, with Andre Holland as Richard, and, as a nice twist, Mariam Hyman as Bolingbroke. A radio play like that production asks even more of the audience as there are no

visual cues. It's a really nice production, and it is still available at NYCstudios.com. I was actually really very busy preparing for this, so I have not heard it yet, but I love the fact that I'm listening to regular NPR and they're advertising *Richard II*, so Georgia you got to make sure you listen to that.

Thornton: That's interesting because the REP, the company that I work with, has a radio play performance lined up in the fall. We will be doing an adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

Mattfield: I didn't get to hear Betsy's answer about *Richard II* and adaptation. I was just going to say that I did a significant amount of adapting during that process. It wasn't because it was all female; we really didn't make anything of that. I kept referring to it sort of as a modern day parable or as the Cohen brothers. The play shows people who are not ready for the change that is coming. There is a big change in the world that is about to happen, and there are some people who are good at seeing it coming and adjusting, like Bolingbroke, like Northumberland, those people are willing to do what it takes to survive, and there are people like Richard and Gaunt who are not, so that was sort of the core of the production for me.

We started in Elizabethan traditional male clothing and updated to very modern, a bit more androgynous costumes as we went through it. The first person to come out was Gaunt, who had died in Elizabethan and then immediately switched to Northumberland in this very sleek modern kind of pant suit thing. Everybody was like, "Whoa, what is that thing that just walked on stage?" It was really, really effective. The change was so visible when the audience could see who was changing clothes and when were they changing clothes, when were they making that movement over to the new world?

The cool thing with plays like that is there are so many characters and you can adapt them. I like to take smaller characters and give them arcs because Shakespeare was like, "I have to write a character for my thirty-fourth actor in the company," so he comes in and announces something. We don't have that since we usually have about ten to twelve actors, so you can take characters and sort of remake their arc to be a little bit more interesting. You can take this bit of language and move it over here and now that gives Percy a really interesting arc in a way that he didn't have before, because he just kind of shows up, says a couple of lines, and then gets out.

Babr: Did Shakespeare have thirty-four actors in his company?

Mattfield: He had a lot of actors. I don't remember how many, but it's a lot. He had a lot of actors that he had to write for. We don't have nearly as many unless we're at the National or on Broadway or something like that. We tend to double cast a lot, and so did he, but then you get into those histories and you've got to double cast sixty roles or something like that with thirty-some actors. Because we truncated it. When that happens, I think it's really cool to give this character, who starts in the beginning and then disappears completely in the second half of the play, this other person's language. And you can see them become this part of the way that the world is transitioning. I actually think of those limitations as new forms. When I only have twelve people, I can make these two characters the same person and see what kind of arc that gives them to make that a more satisfying sort of story. It is more interesting to play as an actor, and it can help facilitate the story telling. It can help tell the story that we are trying to tell from another angle.

Babr: I have a question, and this is for all three of you. We've had fabulous papers about all sorts of amazingly adaptive pieces and how pieces have been adapted for various reasons. What are the foundational things that you think about? I know that you had that amazing adaptation of Frankenstein that you've done recently. Do you change something just to make it cool and sexy, just for the sake of controversy? What are the fundamentals that you have to keep in mind as you're "adapting"? What are the fundamentals that you hold on to as you amplify the voice of a piece?

Mattfield: Two things and then I'm done. What story do you want to tell? What questions do you want to ask? That's the thing you base the adaptation on. I could elaborate, but I've been talking.

Thornton: I think I've done a fair amount of cutting Shakespeare's plays for the American Shakespeare Center's Actors Renaissance and I always just fundamentally try to maintain the integrity of the story that the playwright was telling. I'm not a huge fan of adaptations that are about changing the story to fit your thinking because if you do, I feel you should just write your own play. I'm interested in how do you adapt the text while still remaining true to the heart and intent of it.

Bahr: We have a comment here from Howard Schmidt, and then another question here. As a costume designer, I wanted to follow through on René's comment on bringing up costumes. If I remember right, prior to early 1919 contracts, which, just in terms of historical trivia, I believe happens to coincide with the Spanish Flu epidemic, actors still had to provide their own costumes. There were some notable exceptions, which I think were Russian or German companies.

What I am seeing on Zoom theater are actors not being trained to be on the same page with their fellow actors in terms of costumes. More significantly, I can see which actors have thought out the lighting and the scenic background. I just have to let you know that before this thing started, René actually turned on a light to make sure that his light was better, and it is, and then I turned on my light. So, where I'm headed is, I'd like to ask how to quickly help out actors in terms of the light in which they are revealed, the clothing they are seen in, and having a background which doesn't compete with the actors for the focus. Any comments on that?

Mugavero: Yes. I have a whole video on how to present well on Zoom based on what I have observed as an actor working in these circumstances. I'm about to present to a group of women at a local financial institution here because their boss was saying that the employees turn their cameras off during a meeting with a client because they don't want to be seen. We're training people in a different way to connect on a human level using Zoom or Skype or whatever, and a lot of it is about setting up your environment to succeed, like lighting, making sure you can be heard with whatever device you're using.

As far as actors collaborating with costume design, you know we don't really have directors for these online meetings—sometimes we do, sometimes we don't—so there's no hand involved to say, "Hey Betsy you need better light on your face." Everyone is just trying to survive on their own and our access is limited to materials in our own home for costumes. So, if you are doing a period piece and one person has a cool bonnet, but nobody else does, should that person really wear that bonnet? If they do wear the bonnet, you as the viewer are confused, like why is she wearing a costume and she's not. It is all affecting the way that you're hearing the story.

Mattfield: So, I shouldn't have worn the bonnet is what you're telling me.

Mugavero: Get rid of the bonnet! I had two productions that were influenced by costume, one in particular. The costume designer knew our limitations and said, “Hey, if you’re playing Mistress Ford, you’re blue. All the Fords are blue, all the Pages are red, and that’s how we’re going to remember who everybody is, and so-and-so is going to wear this kind of hat when he’s this character.” It wasn’t based in any kind of style or period, but it was helpful to the audience to follow the characters.

Mattfield: That’s really cool too, the idea of everybody being blue, which is just what you were talking about Michael—reduction—because we are reduced to this. Or, maybe as René was demonstrating, you can do more, you can play with the conventions, but it is kind of cool to reduce what a costume designer does to “you’re all blues to help tell that story.” That is sort of a stripped-down version.

Bahr: I found that it goes both ways. We have so many conventions, so many beautiful ways that we are using technology to help and assist us, and then there are other people who completely strip everything away so it is just spoken word. In other words, black screen, in just their lighting. I’m thinking of the Patrick Page’s *Macbeth* where they just used black screens and candles, kind of experimenting with the medium. You can apply that to any theater play that we’re watching, right? There are some performances where we completely strip it away so it’s just the essence of the words or we bring in things to emphasize all of that.

Mugavero: Not to speak again, but what we found at Southwest Shakes is the more we could see of someone’s home, the more their personality was visible, the more successful the reading was. People are given a chance to see you in your habitat and that’s really cool for an audience. It’s really cool for me to see where all of you are right now. “Iris I wish I was with you wherever you are right now. Take me home please Iris.” We found that the blank screen didn’t resonate as well with people.

Bahr: Which I think, Howard Schmidt, might mean there is a lesson there. There is something about character when we add all those things. Your question applied to this and I think it will launch into other places here in a minute. When it was determined we were going virtual for the Wooden O Symposium, we only had two or three weeks to pivot into this. We started exploring and I

talked to three different salesmen who sold me Whova (an event management app). I don't know what any of these salesmen look like as none of them let me see their faces. I know that they were probably told by corporate that they were afraid I was going to make a judgment about this young guy however he looks, but I thought it interesting that they saw me. They got to see what I look like and that we are engaging this way as opposed to this human interaction that we want here. Hey, I'm really loving the product, but it would've been nice if I could've talked to an individual. Oh, didn't they talk to you? No, it was a nameless screen with a packaged promotion. That's kind of the world we have.

Mattfield: I think we've all been in those comedies where you're like, man I really could've gone with a faceless screen out there; that would've really improved my performance.

Bahr: And as a teacher, that's where I say, hey at some time in the class, I've got to see your face; I've got to see what's happening here.

Thornton: I'm the same way with my students. I know there was a lot of talk about letting your students have their cameras off for x, y, and z reasons, but in my classroom, I'm sorry, you have to have that camera on, A) because, frankly, I just need to know that you're actually there, which I cannot do if your camera is off, and B) staring at my computer screen with a bunch of blank black squares on it is not a good time for me. Even here, I can see three to four of the attendees and so that interaction that I miss so much from live faces I can at least get by seeing your faces that I cannot get via blank screen. I'm not a big fan of everybody having their cameras off I have to say.

Bahr: Again, opening it up for any questions you may have. I have a question here from Chris, who asks, "Are any of you surprised by any ah-ha moments, or have you had an epiphany about a character or line that you don't know you would have had with that line or character within a regular season? I'm assuming that those ah-ha moments happen to you on a regular basis, but I'm asking you to look at the whole canon of plays that you have. Have you experienced that moment of adaptation or discovery when all of a sudden you saw something that you didn't see before in another play?"

Mattfield: All the time. I think that's why we keep coming back to Shakespeare because I've played Hamlet three times and I've seen it a billion and read it a bunch and the last performance I probably found new things or heard something in a different way. Every time, there's something that you've heard over and over and over and then you finally hear it a new way and you go, I've never thought of it that way. I never thought of this being the operative word. As the man in the play says, "it hath no bottom." In most of the plays, maybe not in *Merry Wives*, but most of the plays, you never go, well, we've done all the Macbeths we can do; that was it; we found it. We've accomplished *King Lear*.

Mugavero: My process has changed a lot as an actor since I became a parent because I don't have time to cry myself to sleep at night over my choices on stage, which I did before, admittedly. I was so self-loathing about what I was doing and choosing. Now I have to come into every rehearsal and use every single moment that I'm rehearsing as wisely as I can and make choices as an actor and think, "Well, that didn't work," with much less ego involved. So I say okay that that didn't work. I'll try something else next time. That's just because I've had to adapt to my personal life. I think it's made me a better performer because I've started to—it's not that I've lost the doubt that I have about myself from time to time, but I've started to accept that things are going to change and that I can try new things, and that I have to use my time as wisely as I can when I'm in the room with everyone.

Babr: I think we just heard an actor testify to what all the scholars have been saying, that every production is an adaptation.

Mattfield: Absolutely it is. It has to be, and probably some of them were intended to be. I don't know that Shakespeare necessarily intended his *Hamlet* to be four and a half hours long. It's probably part of the plan to figure out what you want to keep, what you want to cut. He had been writing it for years and years and years and years, probably changing it and making little additions here and there and then eventually you can trim it. It's like a director's cut; you trim it back to whatever theatrical cut you want.

Babr: René? I'm sorry, Georgia [audience member] go ahead.

Georgia [Audience Member]: I'd like to go back. Betsy talked about how you play off one another if you're on the stage, but right now you can't look in people's eyes—you don't see; you're all

in your own little box—so what are people really doing to create connections? You're kind of all in your own world, so how do you bring your globe with all the other globes and still feel that you've done a kind of interactive performance? I'd like a little more comment on that. What do you bring, René, when it's almost like doing a single play by yourself, but when it gets integrated, it has to work together, so how do you rethink that? Do you just hope it works? What happens to you?

Thornton: I think a little bit of this was touched on earlier, but listening becomes a different thing and active listening becomes super important, especially because now there's a camera on both of you and on a stage you could turn your back and do something. And, similarly, there's the thing that Betsy was talking about. I've tried to get better at just talking to the camera instead of trying to really feel like I'm connecting to the actor because now I'm not connecting to anybody. I'm neither connecting to the actor or the audience, and so for me, it's just the audio of hearing my scene partner and then responding to the sounds of how they said what they said. That is sort of what I would do on stage, but I don't have the physical thing to also be reacting to.

Mugavero: We are also finding that when you're acting in this medium it's kind of like being compressed in a box. Our bodies have to be small and compact and you have to keep everything tight. So, if you have to have an outburst, you have to have an outburst that's smaller, because most of the time you're not going to be able to do extreme movement and how that translates is sort of dicey. You learn as you go because if you move too fast it's confusing and it's visually annoying and so you have to have all of your reactions be like film acting, have it all be in your eyes and your face and in your vocal quality. You can't shout over Zoom. People are wearing headphones and it just doesn't filter correctly with the audio technology that we're all using. For example, whispering works on Zoom; it does not work on stage.

Mattfield: It's interesting too to see how quickly we all learned tricks—sometimes just out of necessity. When you're on stage, a director might say to you a couple times as a young actor, can you do this with your upstage hand so that you're not blocking yourself off from the audience. Go like this instead so that they can see you. You figure that out, and after you do that a couple times you know to do that with your upstage hand so you don't block yourself off.

When we started sitting doing Zoom, it took me maybe two readings before I realized I can't jump in because if I jump in everything gets muddled and you can't hear both things at once. You can't hear the other person talking. In the theater you can, but on Zoom you can't; you hear one person or the other. I figured out this trick with *Hamlet* where somebody would say something. I would wait and go [audible exhalation] and then start. The sound, the audible exhalation would bring the camera back to me because it's speaker focused. Never doubt an actor's narcissism; it is our greatest tool. I was like how do I bring the focus immediately back to me after that person is done talking, but I don't want to use the words to do it. I want to actually say the words while people are watching me, so you go [audible exhalation] in order to bring the focus of the speaker thing back to you. It took me, like I said, two times to learn that trick, but we do, we adapt.

Bahr: Go ahead Iris [audience member].

Iris [Audience Member]: First of all, I want to say hi to Betsy. I was lucky enough to see her in *Romeo & Juliet* and *Othello* and I loved it. I am not a professional Shakespearean actor or scholar, but I am a professional audience member. My question is, when we're talking about adaptation and we're talking about the Zoom medium, has anybody adapted a Shakespearean play using a chorus? I've seen choruses used, and I think, when using Zoom, if they want to break down that fourth wall and have the audience members become that chorus, it could really be very effective. I think breaking down that fourth wall would be something you can do on Zoom that you may not be able to do in a theater.

Bahr: Anybody want to talk about the use of chorus or breaking the wall like that?

Mattfield: Well, when we did *Henry V*, we did a Zoom reading at Southwest Shakespeare Company; Brian was playing Henry V.

Iris: I wish I'd seen that!

Mattfield: Yeah, he's pretty good. Beau Heckman, one of our actors in Arizona, was playing the chorus and was specifically talking straight to the audience, but you had mentioned the audience being the chorus, is that what you were saying Iris?

Iris: Yes, doing it on a smaller screen can be a little bit difficult, but also, I love breaking down that wall. I love the catharsis that I get and how I get even more than that, and I think that a Zoom

audience would love it. I think the actors might also like that, and then you would see all different faces and show the universality of something.

Bahr: There actually has been a lot of work. I'm not sure if you saw the session right with Kacen before this. He pointed out that there have been some nice experimental groups. The challenge with Zoom, and Quinn just talked about it, is it can't listen to more than one person at the same time. Somehow, we as humans do, but because of it, if we all start speaking at once, it would not pick up.

Iris: Oh, yes, you're right. Technically that could be a problem.

Bahr: So anytime you see these really amazing choruses with fifty people on a screen all singing harmonically, some sound designer had a great time. It is deceptive. If you play with Zoom's technology, you go wow, I can't do that. We have our high school Shakespeare competition going on right now, which hosts 3,500 kids from all across the nation. We are going to have a virtual competition. Monologues are easy, piece of cake; duo/trios are tougher, and then there are ensemble scenes. We started initially with requiring a fixed camera for a level playing field, but we realized we were limiting artists on their ability to adapt so that we can do some of that stuff that René was talking about. We're going to get some pretty unique performances. We don't care where the camera is placed, but giving the artists permission to use the medium will open up some pretty creative things.

Mattfield: Especially with high schoolers—kids who grew up with screens always being around and always being a part of their life, you are going to get some really cool stuff.

Thornton: For one of my classes this past spring, I had them do their final on TikTok. They had to create TikTok videos for their final, and the things they can create are so much more interesting than our generation is capable of creating with these screens.

Bahr: Let's get out of their way, right? This from Leah, who says, "I just finished a thorough experimentation in adapting Shakespeare to the Zoom medium with a virtual version of the ASC theater camp. There was a lot of TikTok. I agree René; I think they are poised and ready. Just get out of their way and give them permission." Other comments, other questions?

Thornton: I had a visual aid; where did it go? It just closed itself. As we were talking about costumes, I wanted you to see what happens when actors are left to their own devices. I was playing Heracles in a reading of *Alceste* because I've been doing a lot of Greek drama on Zoom lately and comedies. The director wanted an action movie hero, but I own nary a fatigue in my closet, so this is what you get instead. This is what happens when actors are left to their own devices. [shows costume on Zoom]

Bahr: I have another comment here, and I'm going to formalize this a little bit. The writer asks that you tell us a little bit about your journey of discovery. I know all three of you went on a different journey here, but I'm asking about your journey of discovery with the Bard, with Shakespeare. What was your first introduction to Shakespeare, when did you realize that, oh, he's da man, and then, I'm assuming here, but having talked to a lot of actors, there is a second epiphany that comes a little later on in your life where you go, oh, he's da man! What was your first "he's da man" moment and then your second "he's da man" moment and what caused those moments? You want to talk about that?

Mattfield: Yes, I do, absolutely. The first moment was, I think, in high school when I read *Hamlet* and *Othello*. Those two plays just seemed so modern and so close to what was going on in the world and it seemed so odd to me that it almost seemed topical. There was just something very exciting about it. I don't think I was able to articulate what it was specifically that was so interesting about it.

Like I said, you play Hamlet three times and each is different. The first time I had done it, my father had passed away a little bit before and I really got the Hamlet whose father had passed away. He was in mourning. But I didn't understand the Hamlet that came back from England. Having done it two more times, I understood not just the Hamlet who lost his father, but also the Hamlet who comes back from England and has found a kind of balance and a peace and a focus that he didn't have before.

As you age you start to realize, oh, I just hadn't had that experience yet. I think, though, for me, the really amazing things about Shakespeare are those things where you go, well this is a really cool coincidence, but there's no way he could have intended that, right? I mean, it's really cool that this thing happened, but

that's just way too smart; that's on a whole other level of genius. Then you rehearse that show and you rehearse a bunch of other shows and those moments keep happening and you keep going, come on there's no way that he could have possibly intended that. One example, in *Macbeth*, the one that always stuns me, and that I'm still not sure I believe entirely, is the knocking, the sound of knocking. That play is filled with the word or sound dun: Dunsinane, Duncan, "if it were done when tis done, then it were well it were done quickly." Dun, dun, dun.

There is a game that the English play called Dun in the Mire which is a horse pulling a log out of the muck, and dun also means darkness, right? The dunnest smoke of hell. There's so much dun, and I started realizing he's creating this verbal pattern, this dun, dun, dun, dun, which sounds like [knocking on table]. It was the first time I went, oh, he's making knocking; he's making everyone make knocking sounds, so there's this constant knocking sound that is happening throughout the entire play and it was like my head was exploding. There's no way he could have possibly intended that, right? But then you have one, if not multiple moments, in every single play of his that you work on, where you go, for example, how is it that he's working threes into *Hamlet* this way, and it's so consistent. He must have been a very boring person to talk to because whatever was happening in his head must have been the most exciting, fascinating, engaging experience a human could possibly have. It really is beyond anything else I've ever experienced as an artist.

Bahr: René or Betsy? When did you first say wow this is cool and then later, oh wow?

Thornton: I did my first when I was fifteen. I played Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and what was being asked of me was so much more than any school play for kids that I had done up to that point. I immediately noticed that it felt different. I didn't have the words for it then, but I just felt different.

I don't know that I can point to a single ah-ha after that. It was a series of ah-has throughout undergrad and grad school as I was working on these plays and continually rediscovering what a genius he was in so many extraordinary ways. And still, as I think Quinn said earlier, to this day this is still why I like doing these plays because I can still hear things that I haven't heard before. I

was thinking about Betsy's Olivia in *Twelfth Night* last summer, the 8000th production of *Twelfth Night* that I have been in or seen, and yet, I heard lines in new ways from her that I had never heard from Olivia ever before. That's both attributed to Betsy as an actress and also to the genius of Shakespeare—the depth of his writing—that it can resonate so profoundly in different ways. Usually something profoundly resonates in just one way, but he was able to make it so it could be brilliant in a bunch of different ways.

Mugavero: Yes, it's just peeling back an onion. You're finding new layers of every character, every line, and everything in the text in every exploration you have of a play. I started in high school and fell in love with the text because at the time everyone was saying that my voice was annoying and I didn't want to talk on the phone. I didn't know what was going on, like I just didn't sound fun for anyone to listen to. So I was really insecure about speaking out and speaking up. I mean I had friends; everything was fine, but in my own sad hormonal brain, I thought everyone hated my voice. So, I found a Shakespeare book in my parents' house and started reading *Rome & Juliet*, just instantly fell in love with it, and said, "wow, there's so many words you can use as a human, and this guy really put them together well." Then I started studying and ended up feeling that I had an aptitude for it and a love for it. As I developed as a person and as an artist, I just kept coming back to it and loving it, and it's still going to be my life's work whether or not there is theater that we can get paid to do. I continue to pursue this because I find more of myself every time I get to speak the language and every time I get to hear someone else speak it.

I think there are two ah-ha moments that came to mind. Of course, every minute I'm out there or listening in a dressing room or in an audience, there are ah-ha moments going off in my head constantly, but when Quinn and I did *Hamlet* in this garage warehouse thing in LA, which was my only experience doing the play, and his second time playing Hamlet, it was really cool, really weird and very LA. We were in the round and people were sitting on couches and drinking, and it was a really cool production. I had just come out of grad school and I was in LA and I was very unhappy. So listening to Quinn say the Hamlet lines about being the quintessence of dust, about what it is to be alive and how frustrating and huge and small it is at the same time was exactly

how I was feeling at the moment. I was trying to find purpose and trying to figure out what the heck I was doing and very, very unhappy. I was like, “Yeah, that’s exactly how I feel. I am Hamlet, right now.” That was the first time that I connected completely with one of Shakespeare’s characters, and of course it’s the one we all do. It was a really beautiful therapeutic moment for me.

I had another ah-ha moment two summers ago when we were doing *Othello*. I was in *Othello* playing Desdemona and I was Nerissa in *Merchant of Venice*. Every day I would go from one rehearsal to the other and wonder how did this guy write both of these plays, not to mention all of the others. These are two totally different tones and people, and yet I have chills all day, everyday with both of these pieces and I’m just so humbled by someone’s ability to do that.

Bahr: Cool, cool. I have one last killer question, but before I go to that, I want to open it up for any other questions that you as a company of participants might have. Are there any other comments or questions before I ask this closing question of them? Anybody? All right, here we go. I didn’t warn you about this one, and so I apologize, but can we be honest, really, about what this has done to us, as opposed to saying, hey, we’re trooping through? Please tell us what you feel the future of the theater and Shakespeare is given what you presently know about the theater and Shakespeare through the times you’ve lived in, and the times that we’re going through now. What is the future of theater and Shakespeare?

Mattfield: I think a lot of people and scholars and thinkers and theoreticians will call it different things, but I’ve always called it, or maybe just lately started calling it, original principles. Some people say original practices, but I think what we mean is original principles, the idea of a theater that is really about simple magic and imagination and the very basics of what this art form is. It doesn’t require a ton of money; it doesn’t require a ton of explosions and special effects and whatever. What comes out of the original principles that Shakespeare used in the Blackfriar’s and in the Globe is not a huge expansive complicated kind of storytelling; it’s a simple, deep storytelling and that is what I think has always interested us as humans about theater. We go to theaters to have a clear, simple, and very deep experience. Sometimes you

get additional complexity on top of that, but the present and also the past of successful theater is that you're going there to have a very singular experience, an experience we can't get anywhere else. As Peter Brook says, "the invisible shows up," and all of a sudden there's a spiritual transformation that's happening. I think we get there through very simple storytelling and that's what Shakespeare used. I think he knew that and I think it's why he wrote the way he wrote.

Thornton: I think for me as a culture and society, we are on the precipice of great change. My hope for theater and for Shakespeare in the future is that we have had four hundred years of Shakespeare primarily being told from the perspective of a singular voice and now we have an opportunity, as theaters reconstitute themselves as places of inclusion, to hear what Shakespeare sounds like and what it looks like when we let different voices tell his stories. I'm excited to see what that looks like, and what it sounds like, and how I can continue to have more ah-ha moments with Shakespeare when I get to hear different voices speak his language.

Mugavero: I think we'll see, I mean, he's already the most produced playwright in America, he and Lauren Gunderson, but I think we're going to see even more Shakespeare happening because it's public domain and people can do it outside in their backyard. People like me and Quinn are going to be doing it on a sidewalk this winter. And we'll be doing Dickens, writing our own adaptation, but we're going to have to keep doing this work and it is the work that is available to everyone. It is work that everyone wants to come to because it's familiar in some way. Even if you are afraid of Shakespeare, you can think well, it's free, let me go watch that. I think we'll have a lot more people, a lot more amateur companies popping up to produce their own Shakespeare, which will make it more accessible to everyone in their own backyard.

Bahr: Well, thank you very, very much. I want to thank you for your lifetime of great performances, which I've been able to see and have benefited from. I know there are many patrons missing the theater right now. We miss you on the stages; we miss you and creative things happening. We will keep the torch lit; we'll keep the lights on and we will all return to those spaces again. I want to thank you for your experience, for sharing what happened to you personally, and also for sharing about your thoughts on adaptation as well. Thank you very, very much and God bless.