This Element offers a first-person phenomenological history of watching productions of Shakespeare during the pandemic year of 2020. The first section of the Element explores how Shakespeare ‘went viral’ during the first lockdown of 2020 and considers how the archival recordings of Shakespeare productions made freely available by theatres across Europe and North America impacted modes of spectatorship and viewing practices, with a particular focus on the effect of binge watching Hamlet in lockdown. The Element’s second section documents two made-for-digital productions of Shakespeare by Oxford-based Creation Theatre and Northern Irish Big Telly, two companies that became leaders in digital theatre during the pandemic. It investigates how their productions of The Tempest and Macbeth modelled new platform-specific ways of engaging with audiences and creating communities of viewing at a time when, in the United Kingdom, government policies were excluding most non-building-based theatre companies and freelancers from pandemic relief packages.
Viral Shakespeare

Performance in the Time of Pandemic

Elements in Shakespeare Performance

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This Element also has a video abstract: www.cambridge.org/aebischer

Keywords: broadcast, digital, pandemic, performance, shakespeare

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Introduction

Shakespeare Goes Viral

Imagine then that all this while, Death (like ... stalking Tamberlaine) hath pitcht his tents ... in the sinfully-polluted Suburbes: the Plague is Muster-maister and Marshall of the field: ... the maine Army consisting (like Dunkirke) of a mingle-mangle.

(Thomas Dekker, ‘The Wonderfull Yeare. 1603’. D1 r)

[T]he publick shew’d, that they would bear their Share in these Things; the very Court, which was then Gay and Luxurious, put on a Face of just Concern, for the publick Danger: All the Plays and Interludes ... were forbid to Act ... for the Minds of the People, were agitated with other Things; and a kind of Sadnes and Horror at these Things, sat upon the Countenances, even of the common People.

(Daniel Defoe, Journal of the Plague Year [1722] 1992, pp. 28–9)¹

In March 2020, theatres went dark and screens lit up across Western Europe, Canada and the United States. In Exeter, United Kingdom, where I live, people were hunkering down after a final week of frenzied attempts to get supplies (of all things) of toilet roll, along with bulk purchases of hand sanitiser, dried pasta and tinned tomatoes. Meanwhile in Staunton, Virginia, the American Shakespeare Center’s actors got together for one final performance of their touring production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Playing to an empty theatre and filmed by three camera operators who were learning and visibly improving their craft skills in the course of the performance, that production felt like a swansong: a last, desperately joyful,

¹ Defoe’s Journal, written in 1722 about the plague year of 1665, when he was just five years old, is not as much an eye-witness account as a fictional memoir, based on extensive research, that offers a cautionary tale to contemporary readers at a time when the next outbreak of the bubonic plague was thought to be imminent (Backscheider, 1992).
cobbled-together tribute to an era of communal theatre making and theatre watching that had abruptly come to an end.\textsuperscript{2}

As one country after another shut its entertainment industries, daily press conferences communicated infection and death rate statistics along with the latest sets of restrictions on everyday life, ‘non-essential’ workers were furloughed, left unemployed or made to convert their homes into workplaces. Care homes shut their doors and battled with outbreaks that killed many residents. Households went into isolation, parents struggled to combine work with homeschooling their children, and the silence outside our house deepened until birdsong could be heard again, punctured with alarming frequency by the howling of ambulances in the distance.

Locked out of their theatres, actors, managers, producers, backstage creatives and their legal teams leapt into action. Many big theatres that had, over the previous decade, started to extend their reach beyond their local communities by appealing to national and international audiences through digital theatre broadcasts, now rushed to adapt to the ‘new normal’ of isolation by hastily checking and renegotiating broadcast contracts so as to allow them to open up their archives. Audiences worldwide were given free access to past productions but were asked for donations to keep the institutions afloat. Other theatre companies, and freelance performers who rapidly organised into new configurations, retooled almost instantly to continue performing live via videoconferencing platforms, with the Zoom platform emerging as the most commonly used digital stage. Sir Patrick Stewart started to read one Shakespeare sonnet a day, and seasoned actors and novices alike performed monologues to their phone cameras.\textsuperscript{3}

Audiences responded by binge watching Shakespeare productions brought into their homes from a range of theatrical cultures and to organise their diaries so as to accommodate the fortnightly \textit{Globe on

\textsuperscript{2}Michelle Manning writes about this production in a draft chapter for \textit{International Academic Arenas} (PhD thesis, Anglia Ruskin University).

\textsuperscript{3}For fuller accounts of the range of Shakespeare productions around the world, see Allred and Broadribb (2022b); Kirwan and Sullivan (2020); Smith, Valls-Russell and Yabut (2020).
Screen streams from Shakespeare’s Globe on Monday nights, the weekly live hybrid of Zoom-plus-YouTube performance from the The Show Must Go Online series on Wednesdays, the Thursday double bill of streams by the Stratford Festival in Ontario and National Theatre At Home on YouTube, and the weekly ALMOST live Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) show on Marquee TV on Saturdays. Companies with smaller archives, such as Cheek by Jowl or Lazarus Theatre, had to squeeze their own streams into this busy schedule. Those who, like me, have an interest in European theatre, additionally slotted in streams from many of the most prominent European houses. To help one another through the maze of available productions, bloggers began to create listings of English-language and European streams. Impromptu ‘watch party’ communities and Zoom discussion groups sprung up, while on Twitter, hashtags connected with specific streams pulled viewers together into audience groups on the hoof.

On social media, memes about how Shakespeare wrote King Lear and Macbeth while supposedly ‘quarantined’ during the plague began to spread and eventually got picked up by mainstream media. An allusive cartoon in The New Yorker magazine did not even need to mention Shakespeare to make its Shakespearean point (Figure 1). Instead, Maddie Dai made the link explicitly in the tweet with which she shared her cartoon on social media: ‘devastated the pandemic has revealed yet another difference between shakespeare and i: he spends quarantine writing king lear, i spend quarantine writing panicked messages to my father, telling him to leave bunnings warehouse [sic]’ (@maddiedai, 23 March 2020). Meanwhile, in a full-length article in The Guardian, Andrew Dickson trawled through Romeo and Juliet, Timon of Athens and King Lear to find the most repulsive plague metaphors that might have arisen from his direct experience of writing during outbreaks (2020).

In other words, Shakespeare, both as a cultural figure and in the shape of his plays, ‘went viral’. Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley (2013, p. 16) define

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4 The series had started on Thursdays but moved to Wednesdays once the NT live shows began to screen on Thursdays.

5 @TheRSC tweet, 10:20 a.m., 27 March 2020.
such virality in media as ‘a social information flow process where many people simultaneously forward a specific information item, over a short period of time, within their social networks, and where the message spreads beyond their own [social] networks to different, often distant networks, resulting in a sharp acceleration in the number of people who are exposed to the message’. Shakespeare thus began to be associated with extraordinary productivity and creative genius that was linked to the newly widespread scenario of social isolation for fear of contagion. At the same time, he also paradoxically became a figure for community at a time of isolation, and the ability for art in general and theatre more specifically to reach beyond the boundaries set up by lockdown conditions and connect artists with their audiences and audiences with one another.
Celebrating Shakespeare in Lockdown

Just over a month into the United Kingdom’s first Covid-19 lockdown, Shakespeare lovers across the world celebrated ‘Shakespeare’s birthday’ on St George’s Day, 23 April. This was a day spent entirely online as I launched Shakespeare, Spectatorship and the Technologies of Performance, a decidedly pre-pandemic book focused on the rapid expansion in the use of digital performance technologies between 2013 and 2016. Part III of the book, as it turned out, was suddenly highly topical in its concern with the question of how digital theatre broadcasting might create liveness effects for viewers distributed across the globe watching Shakespeare from their individual homes. I had vaguely planned a low-key local book launch sweetened with Devon scones, clotted cream and strawberry jam for my Exeter colleagues. Instead, I was now engaged in a social media campaign that involved a podcast alongside unreasonable amounts of tweeting in both the morning and the afternoon to catch the attention of potential European and North American audiences.

In between tweets to boost the Shakespeare birthday celebration posts of colleagues who were also launching books and giving lectures to mark the occasion, I rewatched parts of Toneelgroep Amsterdam’s stream of its Dutch-language production of Het Temmen van de Feeks/The Taming of the Shrew (see pp. 43–52 of this Element) and dipped into the stream of Hamlet which had just come online the night before from the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin.

In the early afternoon, I participated in a crowdcast research seminar on early modern soundscapes. Then, in preparation for a group discussion on Zoom the next day of the National Theatre’s YouTube broadcast of Simon Godwin’s 2017 Twelfth Night starring Tamsin Greig as Malvolia, I rewatched parts of that National Theatre At Home broadcast. I took some time out at 8 p.m. to join the rest of the United Kingdom in the weekly ritual of the one-minute-long round of applause to show our appreciation of the tireless work and sacrifices made by the National Health Service and carers in dealing with the pandemic. I then returned to my screen.

As Europeans arrived towards the end of their Shakespeare celebrations and my family went to bed, more and more events were coming online from the United States.
First off the mark was the Folger Shakespeare Library, which had hosted a series of lecture and workshop streams during the afternoon and now ‘premiered’ a stream of its 2014 co-production of Teller and Aaron Posner’s *Macbeth* as a ‘watchalong’ on its Facebook site. As a family of actors (Ian Merrill Peakes/Macbeth, Karen Peakes/Lady Macduff and their son) cheerily greeted their online audience and introduced the show, extreme fatigue kicked in at my end. Never having been able to see a Shakespeare production in the Folger theatre, I was thrilled to gain virtual access to this space. After a few minutes, however, my concentration began to falter and I got distracted by the little emojis bobbing up across the screen as the roughly 200 participants in the watchalong began to engage with the performance.

Even more distracting were the comments that started to appear on the side of the screen, which were largely phatic, communicating for the sake of communication. Many audience members were greeting one another and the performers, creating a lively dialogue and community of Folger Theatre fans from whom, in my tiredness, I felt increasingly detached and alienated. Having tuned in to connect and celebrate with North American audiences, I now found myself almost actively resisting connection because it was increasingly obvious that we were coming at supposedly the same thing – Shakespeare – from such different contexts and time zones. As they joyously discussed the kilts worn by the performers and admired the spookiness of Teller’s magical artistry in creating the illusions that characterised the appearances of the production’s witches and ghost, I felt ever more dissociated from their experience and communal appreciation.

It was a relief, at 11.30 p.m., to switch to the start of the Canadian watchalong party hosted by the Stratford Festival, Ontario. Here, I found Festival director Antoni Cimolino in a high-brow conversation with Colm Feore, the star of the *King Lear* stream that would start half an hour later. The change in atmosphere was disconcerting: the discussion now ranged from the challenges of playing a political leader to references to current US politics in what turned out to be the final months of the Trump presidency. In stark contrast with the chummy gregariousness of the Folger watchalong, no attempt was made to interact directly