

TEACHING SHAKESPEARE

Marten Frazier, *Column Editor*

“A King of Infinite Space”: Zoom-Based Performance in the Shakespeare Classroom

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Like so many of us, I spent the spring and summer of 2020 living a significant portion of my life on *Zoom*. From teaching classes and holding faculty meetings to talking with friends and family in other parts of the country, the *Zoom* platform and the pandemic went hand in hand. Looking back on the shutdown, I think of Hamlet’s assertion: “I could be bound in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space—were it not that I have bad dreams” (2.2.254–56). Homebound and socially distanced, we watched what seemed like a bad dream unfold on our screens and in our neighborhoods, as our fast-paced twenty-first-century lifestyles ground to a halt. All the while, we remained connected to each other and the rest of the world over the infinite space of the Internet.

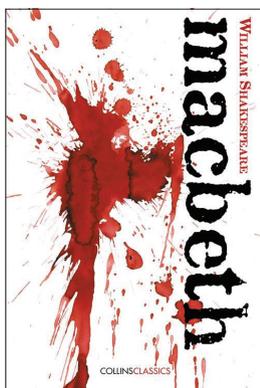
During those early days of the pandemic, *Zoom* allowed us to hold classes in a way that would have been unimaginable a generation ago. While teaching synchronous remote classes was a heavy lift for our faculty (and particularly for teachers who had young children at home), it was as good of an experience as possible for the students. Yet I’d like to focus in this column on the role *Zoom* played when we returned to school in person, and the one it might continue to play after the pandemic is behind us.

THE ILLUSION OF PROXIMITY

Reopening school in the fall of 2020, with no vaccine yet in sight and safety a paramount concern, our faculty faced a series of daunting challenges. Teachers and students were wearing masks, maintaining six feet of social distance, and working from behind plexiglass desk shields, all of which made communication difficult. To allow for contact tracing in the event of an infection, students needed to remain in assigned seats throughout the class. In addition, while most of our students had returned in person, some would

remain remote for part or all of the year, joining our in-person classes over *Zoom*. Teachers who had built their classrooms around interpersonal relationships and in-person experiences found themselves dividing their attention between the masked and shielded students in their classroom and the remote ones on their laptop screen.

In my tenth-grade British and Postcolonial Literature class, my biggest challenge lay in approaching Shakespeare under these constrained circumstances. For the past two decades, I had been teaching Shakespeare through performance. Based on my participation in workshops at the Folger Shakespeare Library and in a National Endowment for the Humanities summer institute at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, I’d built my class around students getting out of their seats and staging scenes. Moreover, my school’s English department had developed an ongoing relationship with the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company. At the start of our study of *Macbeth*, the theater’s traveling company would visit our school and perform the play. Over the next few weeks, each of our six or seven sections of sophomore English



would work on staging a different scene. Members of Cincinnati Shakespeare would visit our classes periodically to workshop the scenes with our students. At the end of our Shakespeare unit, the sophomores would perform their scenes on stage as a sort of *Macbeth* highlights reel.

Despite the pandemic, we delivered on many aspects of our curriculum. For example, the troupe from Cincinnati Shakespeare came and performed the play not in our theater, but on the soccer field. Living and working

together as a pod, these actors could safely interact with each other at close distances. In class, however, my students would have far less mobility. Under these conditions, *Zoom* emerged, ironically enough, as the space where we could interact most freely (see Figure 1). By practicing and recording their scenes at home, the students would be able to go unmasked and to create the illusion of proximity. In addition, because their teams were meeting virtually, it no longer mattered whether a student was in-person or remote.

As the students and I worked on their *Zoom*-based performances, we quickly learned some best practices and hacks for using the platform. (See Table 1 for technical knowledge and resources that can support teachers and students.) The students discovered that if they all put the same virtual backdrop on their screen—a forest, a castle, a heath—they

could create the illusion of being in one space. The students came up with other tricks, such as how to pass objects from screen to screen. I remember being so impressed the first time I saw this. The actor playing Banquo says to his son, Fleance, “Hold, take my sword” (2.1.4) and hands a cardboard weapon toward the screen hilt-first. Fleance reaches forward and seems to pull the same sword toward him. Of course, all you need to create this clever illusion are two similar swords; like all the best magic tricks, its effectiveness lies in its simplicity.

One of the strongest performances in my class, however, came from three students who eschewed props, costumes, and virtual backgrounds in favor of simply speaking the speech. From their separate rooms at home, they performed the scene in which Ross informs Macduff that his wife and children have been murdered by Macbeth’s assassins (4.3). With its tight close-ups on individuals’ faces, *Zoom* can underscore a careful line reading and showcase an expressive delivery. I’d never required students to be off book in the past, and was used to their carrying scripts during their performances. Reading from the screen, on the other hand, creates the illusion that one has memorized the lines. In the students’ most inspired moments, as in this scene, they came across as real people speaking to each other spontaneously. The artifice of *Zoom* quickly falls away as students use it to deliver a monologue or stage a scene.



FIGURE 1
In this scene, Macbeth and Banquo meet the witches. *Clockwise from upper right:* Lauren Coulson, Rithvik Allamaneni, Nico Berger, and Sophie Wiles. Image used with permission.

TABLE 1
A Technical Checklist

Technical Options	Purpose and Details
Hardware	Every student will need access to their own device: a computer, tablet, or phone.
Software	<i>Zoom</i> is free, though students may need to download the app.
Recording	Recording a <i>Zoom</i> call is simple: the person who initiated the call just needs to push the red <i>Record</i> button.
Downloading	At the end of a call, <i>Zoom</i> will convert the video and audio into an MP4 file, which students can save to their device or the Cloud.
Editing	Students may want to open their MP4 file in <i>iMovie</i> , <i>GarageBand</i> , or a similar video editing program. This would allow them to cut unnecessary footage, to layer in music or sound effects, or to add features such as title slides and transitions.
Sharing	Teachers can have students upload their videos to a common folder on a learning management system such as <i>Schoology</i> , or to a shared platform such as <i>Google Drive</i> . Showing all the videos in class is a fun and community-building way of ending this unit.

These technical options can complement *Zoom*-based Shakespeare performances.

ZOOM AS A NEW THEATRICAL MEDIUM

Around this same time, I found myself watching a series of *Zoom* productions of Shakespeare's plays. The Show Must Go Online, the first and arguably the strongest of these virtual companies, was a revelation. Working with a diverse group of actors from around the world, Robert Myles's project involved staging a different Shakespeare play each week for 36 weeks. All of these 2020 performances remain available online and can serve as a great resource for Shakespeare teachers.

The actors in this series found innovative and entertaining ways for characters to duel, kiss, poison each other's drinks, weather a storm at sea, or be chased by a bear over *Zoom*. Yet as with my own students' productions, some of their most powerful moments came from embracing the medium rather than pushing at its limits. As Austin Tichenor says in his review of the series, "One spectacular surprise of [The Show Must Go Online] is the remarkable intimacy it achieves. It turns out that Shakespearean asides and soliloquies gain additional power

when spoken in extreme close-up." Indeed, the more familiar we become with *Zoom*, the more it lends itself as a setting for drama. Why wouldn't Cassius use a *Zoom* meeting to plot Caesar's death, and how riveting would it be to listen in on that call? We recognize the conventions of this virtual meeting space in the same way that we recognize the living room of a sitcom family or that Shakespeare's audience recognized the confines of Mistress Quickly's tavern.

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As the pandemic progressed, *Zoom* was becoming something more than a way of holding meetings, teaching classes, or connecting with friends and family; it was becoming a new medium. Neither stage nor screen, it stands as a unique platform for mounting a dramatic performance, one that has its own emerging conventions. As *New York Times* theater critic Maya Phillips puts it: "The verdict is in: *Zoom* can, in fact, be an effective new stage for theater." Another *Times* critic, Jesse Green, argues of pandemic-era digital experimentation, "[W]e're at the beginning of a new ecology of theater, and oddly it reminds me of what I've read about the theater long ago. Less professionalized, more seat-of-the-pants" (Brantley et al.). Like schools, theaters have

had innovation thrust upon them. Scrappy *Zoom*-based and digital productions, which allowed quarantined actors from around the world to collaborate in real time when brick-and-mortar theaters were shuttered, may well be here to stay.

LOOKING BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

Even with the rise of the Omicron variant, the 2021–22 school year has been far easier than 2020–21 was. With nearly all of our teachers and students vaccinated, the possibility of an outbreak on campus has diminished and we are feeling more at ease. Although we still wear masks, students can move freely around the classroom again. In my sophomore class, we’re back up on our feet and acting out *Macbeth*. Nevertheless, I’m continuing to have students create *Zoom*-based productions this year.

It’s an assignment that teenagers enjoy, even as it calls on them to grapple with and make informed decisions about Shakespeare’s text. Projects like this one can hook students who may not love Shakespeare (at least, not yet!), but who are interested in working with digital tools and multimedia. As my current students watched scenes that last year’s sophomores had put together and excerpts from *The Show Must Go Online*’s production of *Macbeth*, I could see their gears turning. They built on the best of what they saw in these models, creating scenes that had assurance, energy, and flair. When the pandemic is finally behind us, there will still be compelling reasons for working in the infinite space that digital applications such as *Zoom* offer to the English language arts classroom. Just as previous generations adapted Shakespeare for radio, film, and

television, I believe that this generation will find innovative ways to stage his plays in the virtual world. By incorporating digital projects into our classrooms, we can help our students to reinterpret Shakespeare in a new medium that speaks to their own time. [EJ](#)

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