

SHAKESPEARE AND DIGITAL PATHWAYS Shortening distances with *Romeo and Juliet*¹

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Abstract – Two recent productions of *Romeo and Juliet* have turned to video or Skype technology to fragment and infract the dramatic text as well as to create “virtual spaces”, which, I think, contribute to better understand Shakespeare’s ethical relevance as well as the two directors’ political agendas: Nawar Bulbul’s 2015 *Romeo and Juliet* in Amman, Jordan; and Giuseppe Scutellà’s 2018 *Romeo Montecchi: innocente o colpevole?* (*Romeo Montecchi: innocent or guilty?*) in Milan, Italy. In both cases the actors could not be onstage together because they were either entrapped in a bombed-out city in Syria or locked in a juvenile detention centre in Italy and were therefore replaced by their virtual avatars. I argue that while the diffuse connectivity of digital communication has been used as a tool to accomplish very practical purposes, it has also deeply conditioned the experience of the performances as well as of their reception in ways that this paper seeks to explore.

Keywords: digital Shakespeare; *Romeo and Juliet*; contemporary theatre; remediation; intermediality; Prison Shakespeare; juvenile detention centre; Syrian refugees; Nawar Bulbul; Giuseppe Scutellà.

1. Intermedial *Romeo and Juliet*

Against backgrounds of civil war and anger or detention and deprivation, Syrian director Nawar Bulbul and Italian director Giuseppe Scutellà both succeeded in taking Shakespeare where we rarely find him by means of high-tech digital technology. Both Bulbul’s 2015 *Romeo and Juliet Separated by War* and Scutellà’s 2018 *Romeo Montecchi: innocente o colpevole?* (*Romeo Montecchi: innocent or guilty?*) seem to have embraced that “intermedia aesthetics” which is constitutive of certain contemporary appropriations of Shakespeare (Giesekam 2007, p. 8). Such appropriations range from Simon McBurney’s 2004 *Complicite* production of *Measure for Measure* at the Royal National Theatre to Ivo van Hove’s *Roman Tragedies Project* at Toneelgroep Amsterdam (2008-10), even though Bulbul and Scutella were

¹ This essay is a development of the paper “Faraway Shakespeares. Performing the absence” I gave at the 47th SAA (Washington D.C. 17-20 April 2019).

forced into intermediality by the particular conditions of their productions, which also made them unique events. In both productions, the actors could not be onstage together, as they were either trapped in a bombed-out city in Syria or locked in a juvenile detention centre in Italy and therefore some of them had to be replaced by virtual doubles.

While the diffused connectivity of digital communication has obviously been used as a tool to accomplish very practical purposes, it has also deeply conditioned the experience of the performances as well as of their reception. In fact, the conflation of “live theatre” and videotaped reproduction/Skype interaction has modelled two best-case instances of “how the stage and the varied media of electronic reproduction may move from a more or less static side-by-side relationship to a more actively integrated dialogic state” (Cartelli 2016, p. 1472). Notwithstanding the distance between some of the actors and the spectators, Bulbul’s and Scutellà’s productions exemplify, through digital remediation, a theatre that is more like an event to be experienced rather than watched, and where spectators are turned into witnesses and active participants, even if they remain in their seats. Thus, the interaction between live and digital created “virtual spaces” not only contributed to a new way of engaging with *Romeo and Juliet*, but, in my opinion, also offered the potential to better understand Shakespeare’s ethical relevance as well as the two directors’ political agendas. In fact, their digital remediations of the tragedy entailed a deep level of self-reflection so that, in the shadow of the Syrian civil war as well as in the cells of a prison in Italy, the tragedy acquired a new sense of urgency.

Romeo and Juliet was the obvious and also the right play to work with young actors for a number of reasons. First and foremost, even if many of the teenagers or young adults involved in the two productions, for very different reasons, had never read, seen, or even heard about any of Shakespeare’s works, they found themselves particularly sympathetic to the traumas of juvenile violence, civil war, and enforced separation that *Romeo and Juliet* deals with. Undoubtedly, as many commentators have pointed out, this almost archetypal story of two young lovers “locked in conflict with parents and peers, cherishing the uniqueness of their passion, and trying unsuccessfully to integrate it with a hostile and authoritarian adult world” (Holderness 2002, p. 152) appeals directly to the young people participating in Bulbul’s and Scutella’s productions. Furthermore, in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, where the two star-crossed lovers experience physical, linguistic, social, and generational distance/separation, even the stage action signals distance, taking place on two different levels of performance: the main and the upper stage (Evans 2003, pp. 28-48). It is no surprise then, if a balcony, never mentioned in Shakespeare’s text(s) but, yet, so much evoked and used for the “orchard scene” (2.1), has come to represent the tragedy, being particularly useful in figuring situations of liminality, *in-between-ness*. It is a

threshold between the individual and society, between love and conflict/war, and perhaps even between genres. In a way, the balcony can be regarded as a visual catalyst and an embodiment not only of the tragedy's unique potential in exploring the encounter between different worlds and languages, but also of the tragedy's long story of re-appropriation through different media and technologies (Cavecchi 2016). *Romeo and Juliet* appears, therefore, as particularly suitable for experimenting with confluences of live theatre and videotaped reproduction/Skype interaction as well as with discussing the nature and limits of such interaction.

2. *Romeo and Juliet Separated by War but Connected through Skype*

On March 29, 2015, playwright, actor, and director Nawar Bulbul, from the Syrian city of Homs, but self-exiled to Jordan in 2012 as a consequence of being blacklisted by the Bashar al-Assad regime, premiered his version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in the attic of a hospice for war-affected children established in the university district of Amman by Souriyat Across Borders (SAB), a nonprofit organization founded by Syrian women to help Syrian refugees and war wounded to recover from trauma.² The all-teenage cast of *Romeo and Juliet Separated by War* was made up of two different groups of performers who had never met in person and were united via Skype for their performance:³ on one side of the Syrian border, four war-affected children were from the SAB hospice in Amman, where *Romeo* was performed by Ibrahim, a twelve-year-old Syrian refugee who had lost his mother, three sisters, and almost lost his leg in the regime's bombing raid of Damascus in 2014; on the other side, other children were in a secret location in al-Waer, the suburban area of the besieged city of Homs, where drama teacher and pro-revolution activist Abu Ameen carried on with rehearsals even when an internet connection was impossible and worked with the children making masks to protect their identities from the watchful regime of Bashar al-Assad. Fourteen-year-old hijabbed *Juliet* was part of this latter group.

In his dissertation on the theatrical output by displaced Syrians, Gerald Barton Pitchford, who conducted research in Jordan for half a year and had the opportunity to discuss his work with Nawar Bulbul, describes Ameen and Bulbul's rehearsal process with great accuracy:

² SAB - Souriyat Across Borders: <http://souriyat.org/about-us/> (26.6.2020).

³ Five images of the performance are included in the British Library Collection: <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/photographs-of-a-syrian-romeo-and-juliet-2015?mobile=off> (26.6.2020).

Over those four months, Ameen and Bulbul rehearsed *Romeo and Juliet* with both groups of children. In the mornings, Bulbul travelled to the Souriyat building and rehearsed with the Amman group for three hours. Working in a small activity room with speckled brown concrete floors and white walls lined with the children's artwork, the cast in Amman traded positions reading the lines played by the actors in al-Waer. Then between noon and three in the afternoon, Ameen brought the children to his temporary apartment for rehearsal. The timing varied daily in order to avoid creating a predictable pattern of movement that could make capturing them easier. Returning home from Souriyat, Bulbul waited for an email from Ameen to say that the children were ready. Then Bulbul would call Ameen on Skype for the group to begin rehearsal. While Bulbul directed, Ameen took notes and read the Amman casts' roles. After two months of meeting in this way, Bulbul and scenographer Jean Yves Bizien cleared the rooftop of Souriyat, and multimedia designer, Hassan Muhra, completed the Skype projection installment. This allowed the two casts to rehearse together for the first time. Until this point, the children in Amman and Homs had not met each other. (Pitchford 2019, p. 152)

As the American specialist in Middle Eastern and Arab world studies Miriam Cooke recounts, Bulbul was a well-known television actor at home who, after escaping to Jordan, committed himself to empowering and working with these devastated Syrian children, often keeping in mind the tragic story of thirteen-year-old Hamza Ali al-Khatib (Cooke 2016, p. 101), whose body, tortured and mutilated by the regime, turned him into a symbol of the Syrian uprising (Khosrokhavar 2016, p. 253). In fact, Bulbul's work with children was an attempt to fight the threat feared by parents and aid workers of "a lost generation of children who are scarred by violence and miss vital years of education" (Hubbard 2014). The director had already shown how theatre would "keep hope and love alive" (Cooke 2016, p. 101), by producing, in 2014, *Shakespeare in Za'atari*, a simplified Arabic-language version of *King Lear* with a few scenes from *Hamlet*, for which he cast about one hundred children in the vast UNHCR Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan, near the Syrian border, the world's largest camp for Syrians' refugees. Like many other Arab theatre artists (Hennessey, Litvin 2019, p. 3), Bulbul turned to Shakespeare "in quest of a vocabulary" his audience could understand. Significantly, in the documentary film *Shakespeare in Za'atari* (2016), directed by Maan Mousli, Bulbul metaphorically described himself as "a clever fisherman" and Shakespeare as "irresistible bait" he tossed in to lure international attention into the performance.⁴ No wonder Ben Hubbard from the *New York Times* regarded the performance as "a plan to show the world that the least fortunate Syrian refugees could produce the loftiest theater" (Pitchford 2019, p. 122).

⁴ M. Mousli's *Shakespeare in Zaatari* was the best international documentary film in the 67th Montecatini International Short Film Festival 2016.

In the case of his version of *Romeo and Juliet*, rewritten in the Shami dialect of Arabic, Bulbul claimed the performance was intended to address the world and was aimed at “drawing attention to the areas under siege by the regime in Syria after the failure of humanitarian organizations to send food, water and medicine there” (2015). He also “wanted to send a message to the world” that the besieged Syrians “were not terrorists, but children threatened by shelling, death, and destruction” (2015). Indeed, Bulbul’s choice of the iconic tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*, “where civil blood makes civil hands unclean” (1.1.2), was obviously due to the need to awaken the international community to the tragedy of the Syrian civil war with its huge number of displaced children. The production did, in fact, manage to attract both Arab and Western international attention through major news networks: from Al Jazeera and BBC Arabia to CNN International; from Agence France-Presse to *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*.

In an interview, Bulbul declared that, as had happened on the occasion of his 2014 *Shakespeare in Za’atari*, he hoped to break “the ugly” siege imposed on areas inside Syria, “through the children of Syria, with love, theater, art, and hope for the future” (al-Yawm 2015). Undeniably, by being allowed to play, experiment, and create as actors, these children were invited to temporarily inhabit a different world, where they were guided to focus on their skills, dreams, and hopes rather than on despair and impairment. In his attempt to give his young actors relief from trauma and to infuse hope among them, Bulbul adapted the tragedy by expunging any violence and emphasizing instead the power of love, a feeling very much needed in Syria. As confessed by Mohammed Halima, a 24-year-old wheelchair-bound refugee who attended the performance while receiving treatment after being shot five times in Syria, “There is no more love in Syria like in this story. The war destroyed all that is beautiful in my country” (Agence France-Presse 2015). Appropriately, Bulbul kept only the scenes revolving around the love story between Romeo and Juliet (their first meeting, the secret marriage, Juliet’s betrothal to Paris, and the friar’s plot to help them run away) and cut most of the characters, even though he inserted two narrators, one in Amman and one in Homs, who were meant to lead the audience through the several changes of time, scene and location.

The director infused his desire to bring an end to the conflict by changing Shakespeare’s tragic conclusion into a happy ending. Both Juliet and Romeo refused to commit suicide and dashed their poison to the ground in a finale that seemed to echo the general feeling among actors and spectators: “Enough killing! Enough blood! Why are you killing us? We want to live like the rest of the world!” These very simple yet compelling and urgent affirmations emotionally appealed to the audience and moved to tears most of the spectators, who were Syrians as well as Western diplomats who had been invited to the premiere. As Pritchford rightly notes, the tandem

performance “opened momentary pathways through borders and conflict zones allowing the children to make a unified plea for the violence and killing to stop” (Pitchford 2019, p. 150).

Bulbul’s remediation of the story of Shakespeare’s star-crossed lovers, performed by children separated by war and reunited in real-time via Skype, broke not only geopolitical borders but also aesthetic and dramaturgical ones, as Skype calls pushed the boundaries of live Shakespeare interactivity.

Indeed, Skype, the most accessible platform, “whose strength emanates from its ubiquitous availability” (Cavanagh, Quarmby 2017, p. 125), is fully integrated into the play.

First and foremost, while emphasizing the two lovers’ separation, anxiety and pain, thus very obviously and directly connecting them to all the Syrian people and refugees who have been separated from their families and their country, Skype calls are nonetheless the main means of communication between them. Against all odds, Romeo and Juliet are allowed to speak to each other and express their love through cameras.

Furthermore, for the actors and spectators in Homs, the Skype connection with actors and spectators outside Syria was perceived as an opportunity to have their voices heard as well as to grant a moment of relief and hope to restore their past peaceful lives before war broke out. On the other side of the connection, actors and spectators in Amman had the opportunity to feel as if they were in their homeland once again, even if only digitally. Unsurprisingly, Pritchford describes the first meeting on Skype between those in Amman and Homs as “a moment of joy”:

As soon as the two groups saw each other, they both giggled coyly. Ameen noted that the children in Syria desperately wanted to make this connection with other Syrian children living outside of the war. At the same time, Bulbul explained that seeing the children in Syria for the first time reminded the children in Amman that they were still connected to the country. The giggling, Bulbul speculated, was a combination of the children processing these complex emotions bound up with the romantic connotations at play in *Romeo and Juliet*. After a few moments of feigned embarrassment, the children composed themselves and Bulbul introduced the actors from Amman. Ameen followed by introducing the actors in the apartment in al Waer. For two months following this initial introduction, the children forged a virtual bond necessary for the performance and psychological benefit of each. (Pitchford 2019, p. 153)

Even more crucially, since interaction did not always proceed as planned, Skype not only posed unexpected problems, but it also revealed unsuspected, though unintentional, aesthetic potentialities. Not only did the two settings of the performance carry their own suggestions and very different stories, but the real world often intruded, with Internet and power outages in Homs sometimes interrupting the show. In fact, defectiveness and glitchiness in

transmission were the predominant experiences of Bulbul's production of *Romeo and Juliet* and, indisputably, they are also at the centre of its ethical core, being the tangible and symbolic mark of a dangerous situation, where young actors' lives themselves were at stake.

On several occasions, online actors "froze" in awkward positions, lost audio contact, or encountered other technical issues, and every time the connection was lost, spectators feared the connection would not be restored, because of a bomb. As academic and novelist Preti Taneja wrote in her account of the performance, every moment of connection between the two places was really precious, and every time the connection was lost, those watching in Amman "stayed silent, tense with the fear it would not be restored":

[...] Then the connection is cut again. The children remain frozen in their makeshift theatre spaces. Minutes pass, and when it is restored, they carry on as if there had been no interruption. This happens again and again, each time a reminder of the terrible reality in Homs and the damage the conflict is doing to psyches and lives. When the connection returns, the young narrator in Homs – a part written into the text to meet the challenge posed by geographical distance – gets his own laugh and a round of applause. "I swear, if we are not caught by bombs or explosives, and if Juliet is not fired at by a sniper, we will still be here in the next scene," he says. (Taneja 2015)

The audiences experienced lost transmission with patience, far from regarding it in terms of aesthetic failure, as might happen for productions such as Gregory Doran's 2016 *The Tempest*, whose core was, on the contrary, the company's capacity "to master the alien other of digital technology" (Bloom 2019). In fact, at one of the five performances, spectators had to wait an hour before Juliet appeared at the balcony for Romeo to declare his love (Agence France-Press 2015).

The risk for the audience in Homs of being wiped out in just one blast loomed over the entire performance and turned the stage into a space equally shared by spectators and performers, both in Amman and Homs. Glitches and lost connections inevitably forced the audience to feel an active part in the play as spectators responded emotionally to the situation. But glitches and lost connections also functioned as spurs for the actors' acting and reacting every time they were back on screen and in character. It is not hard to imagine how the spectators' cries of joy and relief after a blackout impacted the acting and the energy circulating.

Communal patience proved essential for the successful integration of this interactive performance but the staging posed the question of where exactly the movable border between theatre and everyday life ran. The play's vicissitudes became inextricably intertwined with the real-life risky destiny of the young actors, especially Juliet and the Capulets. Indeed, their condition of being trapped under siege fortified that sense of unity that deeply concerned

both the performers and “the two households” represented in the play as well as those struggling in the bloody Syrian civil war, who, whether Muslim or Christian,⁵ all had similar experiences of separation, violence, and division. In addition, the strife between the Capulets and the Montague led them to re-examine their understanding of toleration and peaceful cohabitation. Appropriately, Pitchford, who attended the performance, describes it as “a moment of heightened affect that united the audience through a felicitous connection:”

The Syrians attending the show, especially for the first performance, were from a variety of social and political backgrounds. Souriyat Across Borders was known for treating any Syrian who came to them injured. So, under the same roof there were civilians, members of the Free Syrian Army, members of different Islamic militias such as Jabat al Nusra and Ahrar al Sham, and it was even believed that there were a few former members of ISIS. Despite the gulf of differences between these individuals, hearing the children’s determination sparked a spontaneous, joyful reaction. When Romeo threw his poison to the ground and shouted his commitment to live, the audience erupted in applause. This energy carried through the last few lines of the play and continued afterwards in the form of group chants. (Pitchford 2019, pp. 178-179)

Even though merely for a very short moment, the performance encouraged a shared feeling of community and togetherness, despite the many differences of age, social class, politics, and religion.

Last but not least, the Skype technology contributed to conveying those Western values with which this “liberation technology” is permeated (Diamond 2010; see also Carson, Kirwan 2014), including individual freedom and freedom of expression – values that were (and still are) at risk under Assad’s regime. As Pitchford underlines in his dissertation, the Free Syrian Army, the primary insurgency force in this area, “recognized the political value in this theatrical project” and enabled anti-regime activist Ameen to use satellite internet to rehearse and broadcast the performance over Skype in defiance of the regime’s attempt at controlling communication space (Pitchford 2019, p. 147). The multimedia performance of Shakespeare assumed therefore the shape of political resistance and resilience.

It is no surprise if French artist Jean Yves Bizien, who worked on the play’s set design, described the performance in political terms as an of resistance to apporession and massacre..⁶ While acknowledging the risk he

⁵ M. VanZandt Collins argues that Bulbul tried to “foster a commitment to Muslim-Christian solidarity” by renaming Friar Lawrence as father Frans in memory of Father Frans van der Lugt, the Dutch Jesuit priest who had worked for the most deprived people since his arrival in Syria in 1966 and was murdered in Homs by the Assad regime in 2014 (Collins 2020).

⁶ See also Bizien and Bulbul’s canvas project “From Amman to Homs, art as resistance” as the ideal continuation of the work started with *Romeo and Juliet*: “Nawar Bulbul /

and the children took by performing the play on the Internet, Ameen himself argued that, for them, Shakespeare was the tool for denouncing the brutality and oppression of Assad's regime.

3. Romeo Montecchi: innocent or guilty?

On December 1, 2018, Giuseppe Scutellà, actor and director of Puntozero Teatro, the theatre company which has been working with young offenders at Milan's juvenile detention centre "Cesare Beccaria" since 1995, presented an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* where, contrary to what happens in Bulbul's performance in which any mention of Romeo killing Tybalt is appropriately expunged, the action started with the Shakespearean scene of the fight between the Capulets and the Montagues and the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt (3.1).⁷ With their exit from the scene, the action was then transferred not to Mantua, where Shakespeare exiled Romeo, but to Milan, where Romeo was re-imagined as a teenager of nowadays, who is put on trial for the murder of Tybalt simulating the procedure of a real life trial of a young man accused of murder in Italy in 2018.

Undoubtedly, Shakespeare seems to bring something special to prison environment, as confirmed by many scholars and practitioners of Prison Shakespeare theatre, a sub-genre of prison theatre or social theatre but also, at the same time, a phenomenon in itself with different roots and traditions (Pensalfini 2016, p. 3). As a matter of fact, Curt Tofteland, the founder of the well-known "Shakespeare Behind Bars" project at the Luther Lockett Correctional Complex in La Grange, Kentucky, argues that more than any other playwright, Shakespeare conceived plays that "invite self-examination, self-exploration and self-awareness" (Tofteland 2011, p. 430), often the first step in a process of transformation. As the academic Niels Herold argues, "using Shakespeare to set up the conditions where such personal transformation can occur may reveal as much about the play as about its players" (Herold 2016, p. 1201). Indeed, by re-reading *Romeo and Juliet* and Romeo's killing of Tybalt through the lenses of their own personal experiences of arrest and trial, inmates/actors developed a deep relationship with the characters they played and often experimented inevitable overlapping between their onstage and offstage lives.

The performance was the result of one of the workshops my colleague Margaret Rose and I have been organizing, once a year, since 2016, with the Puntozero theatre company, and which in the case of the 2018 workshop

Jean Yves Bizien. Theater / life, 2015, Syria", *Imago Mundi*. Luciano Benetton Collection: <http://www.imagomundiart.com/artworks/nawar-bulbul-jean-yves-bizien-theater-life> (8.5.2021).

⁷ The project is thoroughly explained in Cavecchi *et al.* 2020.

involved a mixed group of nineteen undergraduate students in the humanities from Milan State University (two males and seventeen females),⁸ youths from the Puntozero Theatre company, including one actress and two actors who were out on parole, and five inmates from Beccaria (all males aged sixteen to twenty), which is one of seventeen Italian juvenile detention centres scattered over our peninsula.⁹

The criminologist Simone Pastorino, the prison educator Elvira Narducci, and a lawyer specialized in youth justice, Lucio Camaldo, collaborated with us and successfully guided the group to understand the Italian juvenile justice system, thus helping us to fulfill our first aim in the workshop before the actual performance: to shorten the distance and mediate between the participants: our students, for whom the law, justice, and revenge were just abstract concepts, and the young inmates who, on the contrary, had a firsthand experience of crime and trials.

After a preliminary introduction to the Italian “multi-agency” juvenile justice system, which involves different professional figures in the specific fields of psychology, sociology, education, and pedagogy, and aims to create the conditions for greater involvement of civil society,¹⁰ we started to devise a trial for Romeo. We re-created a courtroom on stage and arranged a new cast of characters in addition to the Shakespearean characters of Romeo, Balharzar, Benvolio: four judges (three stipendiary magistrates and one honorary member, chosen among experts in the human sciences), a defense lawyer, a Public Prosecutor, a TV special correspondent, and some witnesses, among whom were the ghosts of Tybalt and Mercutio. Unanimously, we decided to cut out the character of Juliet since Romeo would never have involved her in a trial that would have destroyed her life in the patriarchal

⁸ In Italy, it is the first theatre workshop involving a mixed group of university students from humanities courses and young inmates, which is regulated by a formal agreement between Puntozero and the University. Indeed, the fact that the workshop is part of student curriculum and gives credits is uncommon in Italy, where workshops in juvenile detention centres are still usually on a voluntary basis.

⁹ Currently, in Italy, there are seventeen juvenile detention centres (IPM), located in almost all regions: only one of them, based in Pontremoli, a small country town quite difficult to reach, hosts only girls and young women; other two (one based in Rome and the other in Naples) have a division for girls and women. The Italian juvenile justice system deals with boys and girls, from 14 to 18 years of age, who have committed infractions of the civil or penal code; their sentences are served at juvenile justice institutions until the age of 21, but the jurisdiction of Juvenile Courts remains until their 25th year.

¹⁰ Dipartimento della Giustizia Minorile Direzione per l’attuazione dei provvedimenti giudiziari / Juvenile Justice Department General Directorate for the implementation of Judicial measures, Istituto Psicoanalitico per le Ricerche Sociali (IPRS), *La Giustizia minorile in Italia / Juvenile Justice in Italy*, https://www.giustizia.it/resources/cms/documents/giustizia_minorile_in_ItaliaItalian_juvenile_justice.pdf (1.5.2021).

society of Elizabethan times, as also would happen in our contemporary mediatized society, even if for different reasons.¹¹

The function of Juvenile Detention Centres (IPM) is “to ensure the enforcement of the measures issued by the legal authority such as pre-trial detention or prison sentences for juvenile offenders. In this context, the young offender is granted the right not to interrupt his educational, physical, and psychological development. To encourage the young offender’s attainment of maturity, educational, training, cultural, sport and recreational activities such as theatre are organized in the IPMs”.¹² Despite the IPM’s educational objectives, the head of the prison, Cosima Buccoliero insisted on rigid discipline due to a riot the previous summer, when a group of young inmates had rebelled against some penitentiary agents. This meant she would not allow the inmates to join the theatre group in the prison’s fully equipped 200-seat theatre, which, being placed in a separate wing, is somehow perceived as “a free zone” inmates have to be worthy of. Furthermore, she did not give some of the young inmates who attended the drama workshop permission to take part in the première, which was also open to the general public. However, she agreed our group of students could work with the inmates in a room inside the cell area, the so-called “blue cell”. She also permitted director Giuseppe Scutellà and his video assistant Yuri Bifarella to bring a camera in and to film the inmates. It was precisely these restrictions that made us decide to cast the confined inmates-actors in the role of witnesses of Tybald’s death. They became, therefore, the actor-subjects of interrogation by the Public Prosecutor, later edited into monologues to be screened in the theatre for the première. Moving into video was a real challenge for them.

Under the director’s guidance, rehearsals became the space where every individual creative contribution was highly valued. Working in small mixed groups, the inmates collaborated with the students and wrote their parts as Shakespearean characters who bore witness before the four judges of the Juvenile Court about the “brawl” (3.1.3) leading Romeo to murder Tybalt. Each actor faced the camera alone, in close-up, positioned in the role of witness, and read his part from wooden boards that had been previously written. Each of them gave their own version about what had caused the row and the dynamics of the fight: W. as Benvolio, Gesun as Mercutio, Y. as Tybalt, Francesco as Balthasar and K. as himself, a fifteen-year-old Albanian who escaped from his country by bus, and, at that time, had no knowledge of Italian.

¹¹ The playtext *Romeo Montecchi: innocente o colpevole?* is published in Cavecchi *et al.* 2020, pp. 149-171.

¹² DCI Italy – Defence for Children International Italy, TWELVE. *Children’s right to participation and the juvenile justice system.* National report. Italy, http://www.defenceforchildren.it/files/twelve_Italy_.pdf (1.5.2021).

Undoubtedly, the fact the inmates-actors shared with Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* their inability to express their emotions openly facilitated, in a way, the process of writing their testimonies. According to Scutellà, Shakespeare words somehow helped them to overcome both their “emotional aphasia” (Cavecchi *et al.* 2020, p. 121) and their violence, which often rises when “you do not have the words to communicate” (Magill in Fischlin *et al.* 2014, p. 192). Pointedly, Joshua Algery, a former inmate who discovered theatre and music in Beccaria thanks to Puntozero, confessed that he had had to work very hard to bring out the romantic and positive emotions and feelings he had suppressed in order not to suffer while he was in prison.¹³

As a matter of fact, despite their many difficulties, all of these young men, who lacked what Italian philosopher and psychoanalyst Umberto Galimberti defines as the “syntax of emotions” (Galimberti 2007), were guided by the whole group and, between the serious and the facetious, they discovered, experienced, and were able to express a wider spectrum of emotions and feelings. In the process, they also acquired awareness of their mental and physical freedom, not to say, their potential for change. In their accounts, the Shakespearean situation and language registers morphed into something different. Not only the actors' tones and gestures, but also their slang and stock phrases, such as “Mi devi mollare, cazzo” (that more or less translates as “Shit, ditch” or “Leave me alone”) were very close to those they were used to in their own deviant and real-life criminal experiences of gang conflicts, bullying, and disregard of social rules. Indeed, *Romeo and Juliet*, by struggling with the theme of youth and urban degeneration, provided the material to describe the relationship between the young inmates' on and off-stage lives.

What seems especially intriguing is that Scutellà turned prison confinement into an artistic and ethical opportunity thanks to digital technology. First and foremost, by viewing the video of their acting (the first shot was not always the best!), the inmates-actors felt proud of the results of their efforts, even though as a first reaction, they tended to be very critical of their try-outs. Indeed, as scholar and practitioner Rob Pensalfini writes in his volume dedicated to Prison Shakespeare: “working with a group of peers and professional theatre-makers in mounting a production provides a non-violent source of self-esteem and pride” (2016, p. 216). At the same, viewing their acting in performance on the videocamera worked as a sort of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*: by playing the role of murderers, they seemed conscious of their guilt as murderers of the Shakespearean characters; they were brought to act out characteristics of their personalities they were ashamed of, and

¹³ J. Algery in “Joshua Algeru e il desiderio di amore e libertà con il film *Fiore*”, *La Gazzetta dello Spettacolo*, <https://www.lagazzettadellospettacolo.it/cinema/26040-josciua-algeri-intervista-film-fiore/> (8.5.2021).

thereby hopefully to take distance from such characteristics: could this constitute a first step towards a full understanding of the reasons and roots of their deviant behaviour? According to Tom Magill, director of *Mickey B*, the awarded feature-length film adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* developed and performed by maximum-security prisoners inside Maghaberry Prison in Northern Ireland, making theatre or shooting a film in prison is, "essentially, [...] about creating the conditions for people to find the tools and the confidence to use them, in order to write their new ending and perform their new role in it" (Fischlin *et al.* 2014, p. 179).

But there are other reasons why Scutella's use of screening was crucial. First and foremost, during the live performance, by taking the spectators inside the "blue cell" of the juvenile detention centre and inside the inmates' minds, the screening contributed to unmasking what prison, a place of dominance and submission, institutionally condemns to obscurity. Thus, the video camera in a penitentiary context cannot but remind one of the Foucaultian surveillance practices, from Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon to the CCTV to which everyone everywhere is now subjected in our "superpanopticon" and "maximum security society" (Lyon 1994, pp. 4-5). However, the video camera is also turned into a means of exploration and self-scrutiny, both for the inmates-actors and the spectators.

The projection of the close-ups of the offenders works paradoxically by highlighting their physical and metaphorical distance, and yet, by also making them the subjects of a privileged and intimate relationship with the spectators. Indeed, in a way, the absence from the stage of the inmates-actors made them even more present. One after the other, the close-ups of the young offenders interpreting Mercutio, Balthasar, Benvolio, Tybalt, dressed with their usual contemporary clothes, appeared occupying a brightly lit space projected onto a large upstage screen while they testified what they knew about the fight between the Capulets and the Montagues that led to Mercutio's and Tybalt's deaths. With his decision to frame the actors' faces in close-ups, which highlighted facial expressions more than is possible in theatre, Scutellà contributed to creating a situation of intimacy with the audience, thus complicitly bringing to light new aspects of their personalities. Their faces were indeed dramatic revelations of what "was really happening under the surface of their appearances" (Balázs 1992, p. 261). Furthermore, the director worked to remove the distance between actor-as-person and actor-as-performer so that his performers were not playing actors but were just acting themselves. While they played their Shakespearean roles, we also witnessed their "autobiographically confessional 'epiphanies'" (2008, p. 160), to quote Herold Niels' words, so that Mercutio's nervous tossing and speech hesitations (mm's and er's) were also Gesun's. Balthasar's trembling eye and stuttering were also Francesco's.

The intimate atmosphere deeply impacted the spectators' reception of the performance. By watching the inmates-actors in shots that foregrounded their facial expression of frailty and insecurity, and by listening to their broken voices interrupting the penetrating silence in the auditorium, spectators seemed more capable of compassion for the Shakespearean characters' impulsive and careless behaviour and more willing to forgive them: Mercutio, Balthasar, Benvolio, but also Gesun, Francesco and W., the actors interpreting them. Indeed, if, in accordance with Judith Butler, confession should be regarded as a performative act where "the performative force of the spoken utterance" is able to create a different self (Butler 2008, pp. 170, 163), it is easy to understand how and why spectators were guided to reconsider their prejudices about those young offenders, their faults, and punishments. Confession is generally seen as the first step towards redemption, and thus by acknowledging their own frailties and guilt, Mercutio's or Romeo's testimony is understandably seen with great favour by spectators. Seated in the auditorium, one could perceive the pain of each one of the spectators for these young men on screen, their uneasiness as they faced the lack of freedom of inmates-actors.

At the same time, the projection of the close-ups of the offenders actively competed with the live actors on stage for the audience's attention, thus encouraging more active and critical spectatorship. "At the crossroad of various media looks" and therefore open to "a variety of subject positions," spectators were turned from "a passive, monolithic voyeur, who is controlled by the looking structures embedded in a show" to "a pluralistic, changing, interactive viewer" (Klaver in Gieseckam 2007, p. 22). Indeed, I felt that in the process of engaging with the performance, thanks to this toing and froing between live theatre and videotape reproduction, onstage and offstage worlds, each one of the spectators was brought to think differently about juvenile prison.

Furthermore, the condition of being spectators in a theatre within a prison, where the audience had been admitted after the meticulous procedure of checking documents against an official list of visitors (McAvinchey 2011, pp. 1-2), also contributed to turn everyone into active participants at an event bigger than the performance itself: an event counting them as actors along with penitentiary agents, educators, and selected inmates of Beccaria who had been allowed to attend *Romeo Montecchi: innocente o colpevole?* This situation as well as the environment of the prison made them feel unsure as to how near to the truth they might be. Who were they forgiving? Who were they being indulgent with? The Shakespearean character or the inmate acting in the Shakespearean role? Romeo or the actor, the one who was on parole after a period of detention in Beccaria?

I had the impression the performance was succeeding in re-enforcing the idea that there was an urgent cultural and political need for re-engagement

with the ideas of prison and theatre – something Italy had (and continues to have) a desperate need of. The importance of the performance and the whole project in terms of its impact on society at large was clearly reaffirmed in many “diari di bordo”, diaries we asked all the participants to write daily to record their impressions and feelings. Our university students seemed therefore eager to grasp the importance of culture as a deterrent against crime and thereby increasing their understanding of the thinness of the line that separates them on the outside from the teenagers inside prison actually is. Significantly, one of our students, Marta T., points out that, when you get to know them, inmates can be much appreciated:

I have always been afraid of other people’s judgment, but this time is different because I’m not alone on stage. I have by my side a group of people that I have come to know and appreciate for their amazing talent and kindness. [...] People actually came on Saturday evening to see our work. I hope that at least one of them, after the show, will find him/herself thinking that people deserve a second chance, especially teenagers. [...] Everyone deserves the chance to make amends for what they have done. It’s true, we are not perfect, but we can always improve and learn from our mistakes. (Cavecchi *et al.* 2020, p. 178)

Crucially, she wishes the performance would lead at least one of the spectators to believe that everybody, especially teenagers, deserves a second chance.

4. Ethical Digital Shakespeares

Remarkably, despite difficult and disadvantaged situations (a besieged city, on the one hand, and a juvenile prison, on the other), Bulbul’s *Romeo and Juliet* and Scutellà’s *Romeo Montecchi: innocente o colpevole?*, and despite the absence of balconies, tested intersections between electronic and face-to-face experiences and endeavoured to capitalise on the different strengths of each approach in order to create a challenging and throbbing environment both for actors and spectators. The use of a video camera or Skype technology opened exciting new aesthetic and political possibilities and revealed how the contradictory nature of digital technologies both complicates (Fischlin 2014) and enriches the process of remediation of Shakespeare today. They have been “used simultaneously as tools to accomplish a locale purpose, and as technologies that value and conceive their purpose within a wider network of social, cultural economic, and even political conduct, as performance” (Worthen 2007, p. 236).

Thus, in the context of a theatrical workshop in a European prison, a video camera, one of the most common and widespread tools of surveillance and disciplinary power, becomes an opportunity to unmask stereotypes and reveal how much teenagers inside and outside prison have in common in

terms of enthusiasm, energy and shared teen-language; likewise, the use of Skype technology in Syria, even if is controlled by the regime (or precisely because it is controlled by the regime) becomes an action of resistance that inevitably sustains “an ideologically loaded set of cultural attitudes” (Worthen 2007, p. 235). Indeed, thanks to global technology like Skype, the multimedia performance of Shakespeare also assumes the shape of political resilience; as Bulbul argued on the occasion of his 2014 *King Lear* in the Zaatari Refugee camp, “children are the real revolutionaries” and “performing Shakespeare’s play in the heart of Zaatari is a different kind of a revolution against politics and society” (Taha 2014). Indeed, Bulbul’s and Scutellà’s digital Shakespeares proved successful in mapping “the political, not simply in modes of governance, militarism, commerce or diplomacy, but rather, the political as it is suffused by desires, fantasies and the imagination” (Singh, Arvas 2015, p. 184), thus, once again, raising questions about what constitutes the essential or authentic Shakespeare.

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