



Western University

From the Selected Works of Kim Solga

2021

Practising Diversity at the Stratford Festival of Canada: Shakespeare, Performance and Ethics in the Twenty-First Century

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Ethics

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The challenge¹

What does it mean to ‘practise’ diversity in Shakespeare production in the twenty-first century, specifically in an Anglo-American context? How is ‘practising’ diversity, from devising and directing to work in the rehearsal hall and on audience engagement, materially different from the now-familiar (but still important) goal of ‘representing’ diverse bodies on stage? In the last twenty years, debates about what the diversification of Shakespeare performance – along racial lines, gender lines, the lines of age and ability – means or could mean, and the simultaneous interrogation of what ‘Shakespeare’ signifies, for whom, and to whose benefit, have become increasingly urgent issues for scholars and artists (see Worthen 1997; Thompson 2006 and 2011; Thomas 2014; Smith 2016; Solga 2017; Cartelli 2019). If theatre companies across the Anglosphere increasingly share the assumption that diversity and inclusion, in both the casting and creation of Shakespeare in performance, is necessary and good for ethical and artistic reasons, what tools, resources and attitudinal shifts are required in order for those companies to move beyond representations of difference on stage, and toward engaging deeply with equity and diversity as conditions of theatrical production and reception?²

In this chapter, we frame our exploration of ‘ethics’ around these questions.³ We take a case study, mixed-method ethnographic approach that centres on the 2018 production of *Comedy of Errors* at the Stratford Festival in Stratford, Ontario, Canada. Director Keira Loughran (who is a third-generation Chinese-Canadian, heterosexual, cis woman) planned a

Comedy that followed her ongoing interest in diversity practice as a working artist of colour. She ‘envisioned Ephesus, the play’s world, as an inclusive haven for gender-fluid and non-conforming people’, ‘a story of a reunion’ in a ‘society of former persecuted outcasts, whose unique perspective on the world ... challenges, frightens and ultimately liberates them’ (Loughran 2019b). The twins were fraternal; the Syracusan pair were played by women of colour Jessica Hill and Beryl Bain, while male actors Qasim Khan (Persian-Canadian) and Josue Laboucane (Métis) played the Ephesian pair. The cast was consciously assembled, and saw diversity in age, ethnicity and sexual orientation. The experiences of trans folk were incorporated into rehearsal work through the labour of two paid consultants on the show, trans artists Sunny Drake and Cassandra James. Loughran gave actors the important freedom to determine for themselves how their characters identified in terms of gender identification, providing support for this work through the rehearsal process, and in discussions with herself and Drake and James.

In all of these ways, Loughran achieved diversity in both practice and representation with *Comedy*: she fostered an inclusive working environment in rehearsal; she placed a wide range of bodies, in terms of colour, age, sexual orientation and lived experience, on stage; she actively sought to stage gender inclusivity as normative and positive for audiences made up of school-aged children, older adults and many in between. However, even within this open working environment, and even given the Festival’s many resources on which Loughran was able to draw to realize her inclusive vision, our research revealed that Stratford’s larger aesthetic attitudes and working practices placed key structural limits on what she was ultimately able to achieve.

We began our research with two guiding questions: 1) what resources exist to make a thoroughgoing diversity practice possible at Stratford?; and 2) what obstacles exist for artists seeking to work in a practicably diverse way at Stratford? In our explorations of these, we also

uncovered a third, key question: what does diversity presently mean at Stratford, and what more could it mean in order for the Festival to practice greater levels and degrees of inclusivity both in its processes and in representation at all levels of the organisation? We shadowed Loughran's production for approximately six months, from just after it was cast (in late 2017), up to and including dress rehearsal (May 2018). We observed three separate rehearsals at three different stages, including a workshop on trans experiences led by Drake and James; after each rehearsal we compared our observations in a recorded discussion that we later transcribed. We saw a dress rehearsal, and two performances much later in the commercial run. We interviewed cast members, recording and transcribing those interviews; we also interviewed (and recorded/transcribed) Loughran on three different occasions. Finally, Loughran read drafts of this chapter, and fed back thoroughly and generously to us.

In the discussion that follows, we draw on this qualitative data in order to map the reasons why this production, despite its commitment to inclusion in the shaping and telling of its story, did not fully succeed in staging Shakespeare inclusively, and we chart key changes that Stratford and other similar companies could make in order to better enable future productions to do that important work. After examining some of the contexts into which this production's tensions fit, we reflect on our key observations. We wonder: can institutions like Stratford achieve full diversity of practice if they remain primarily committed to the notion of Shakespeare's texts as 'universally' meaningful? How does Stratford's very organizational structure, from its repertory model to its hierarchies of power, impede diversity work in a production's development? And, who is being asked, right now, to do Stratford's diversity work, and on what terms?

Contexts: Shakespeare, diversity, race, and gender

Stratford is the largest repertory theatre in North America; founded in 1952 and in operation since 1953, it was designed as an informal national theatre, grounded in British-influenced, elite Shakespeare performance. Stratford's roots are premised on the notion that Canadian culture could and should be synonymous with traditionally English 'high' art (Knowles qtd in Parolin 2009: 215). Stratford's development over the last 65 years, however, has seen the Festival become increasingly commercially reliant; it is funded by an uneven mix of government grants, box office sales, and corporate and private donors to sustain its significant size (12-plus shows per season) and high production standards. While Shakespeare remains the 'name draw' at Stratford, today his work is less prominent in seasons filled with musicals, modern plays and 'family' shows, a trend that began with Richard Monette's tenure as Artistic Director (1994–2007) and continues today under Antoni Cimolino.

Stratford has long been aware, for reasons both economic and socio-cultural, that it must diversify its artistic base, and particularly that it must include more artists of colour in a wider range of roles if it is to accurately reflect the intercultural nature of twenty-first-century Canada, particularly the region surrounding the Greater Toronto Area.⁴ It has made significant recent strides in this direction. As of the 2019 season, for example, 33 of 128 performers in the acting company were visibly identifiable as artists of colour ('Cast and Creatives' 2019). During the 2017 season, Martha Henry directed two Black Canadian actors, Sarah Afful and Michael Blake, in leading roles in *Twelfth Night* and Jillian Keiley directed a race-, age- and size- diverse cast of women in Anne Carson's translation of Euripides's *Bakkhai*. The Festival worked with Inuit performing arts organization Qaggiavuut to develop *The Breathing Hole*, a new play commissioned from Colleen Murphy, about exploitation of the Arctic, that featured an Inuk director and a substantial number of Indigenous performers. After Stratford hosted the 2016 National Arts Centre 'Summit' on disability, the 2017 season also featured Deaf actor and director Elizabeth Morris in *The Madwoman of Chaillot*. In the summer of 2019 Stratford

hosted a series of events initiated by Loughran in her capacity as curator of the Laboratory, ‘a dedicated space for experimentation and research in artistic processes’ (Loughran 2019b), inviting a range of artists, including UK-based trans practitioner Emma Frankland, to develop work with members of the acting company. In January 2019, Loughran left the Festival as a full-time employee, choosing to explore other artistic avenues, but the 2019 Lab series ‘Beyond the Western Canon’ ran as programmed, under Stratford’s Assistant Creative Producer, Ted Witzel.⁵

This brief overview suggests, on the surface, a large, storied theatre organization committed in equal measure to Shakespeare’s legacy and to race and gender diversity. Below the surface, however, the picture grows more complicated. While in 2019 a full quarter (almost exactly 25%) of the Stratford acting company were of colour, only two of those performers occupied leading roles: Michael Blake as Othello and Baraka Rahmani as the Arab-Canadian Wahida in Lebanese-Canadian playwright Wajdi Mouawad’s *Birds of a Kind*.⁶ Only one of ten directors in the 2019 season was a person of colour (Nigel Shawn Williams, directing *Othello*), and while fully half of the directing cohort were women, all of the latter were established Festival associates, entrenched in Stratford’s working culture. While numerous Stratford company members identify as queer, no artists in 2019 openly identified as trans, nor has Stratford ever featured an openly trans performer on its stages. Morris is thus far the only Deaf performer to appear at Stratford.

Putting these two Stratford snapshots together allows us to look closely at the material differences among three related but distinct forms of diversity practice. Diversity and inclusivity as a cultural and artistic commitment at every level of a work’s development is an ideal for which many companies strive in theory, but which continues to face numerous obstacles in practice. Before this ideal can be reached, diversity may take the form of increased access and opportunity for artists often marginalized in mainstream theatres; literally *being*

included, in more than token ways, in creation and decision-making processes helps such artists to break through entrenched forms of privilege both on- and backstage. Finally, diversity can appear on stage as image: this happens when ‘non-normative’ (i.e. of colour, disabled, queer, non-binary) bodies are present in a production primarily to signal a company’s awareness of diversity as ‘a good thing’, and may or may not feature inclusive ways of developing a show. At its best this form of diversity demonstrates a theatre’s intentions toward future diversity practice; especially when a large theatre company such as Stratford relies on box office for significant funding, radical shifts in the look and feel of a company need to be carefully calibrated and adjusted over time. Relying too much upon diversity as image, however, also risks hobbling the goal of inclusivity over time, because diversity as image alone cannot ensure that all bodies in a rehearsal room have the same access or opportunity to share their stories (and to do so safely), or to participate evenly in the process of story creation.

For Loughran personally, diversity labour means first and foremost increasing opportunity by creating working spaces where historically marginalized artists can share in artistic authority and participate in theatrical creation from the ground up. She notes that this sort of diversity work challenges companies to ‘tak[e] opportunity away from things that are familiar, reliable, and known’ (Loughran 2019b) – the dramatists, plays, and actors that are reliably saleable – and offer their space to new stories and perspectives. Loughran’s commitment to this kind of diversity practice is evident in Stratford’s Laboratory and Forum, spaces where creators, directors and educators from within the company and around the world meet to debate the limits of current practice and explore new methods of working. Loughran also, however, understands crucial diversity work to happen in the rehearsal hall when actors imagine themselves into another’s body and try to make sense of experiences radically unlike their own; this is the kind of work she encouraged her cisgendered ensemble in *Comedy* to do,

for example, as they learned from Drake and James and sought to establish their characters' preferred gender identifications.

While there is much to praise and support in this inclusive thought work, it also sits uncomfortably with Stratford's status quo, in which emotional realism is the preferred acting practice (more on this below), and in which white and male perspectives still dominate the shaping of story in most productions. While we point above to signs that Stratford's casting (and some commissioning) is increasingly and visibly diverse, overall non-white, non-male, disabled, or otherwise differently-oriented artists in lead roles or directing gigs still represent a comparatively small percentage of Festival labour. The stock-in-trade of large companies like Stratford is the argument that Shakespeare's plays are 'universal' in theme and appeal, filled with stories to which all humans can relate, but whose interpretations of Shakespeare are counted and valued most by this argument? Whose stories are most likely to be reflected, embodied, told, and how? In a world of ideal diversity practice, where a range of voices and perspectives work together on a production's creation from the ground up, the imaginative inclusivity Loughran champions is both welcome and necessary—it might, for example, lead to a performance of a Shakespeare comedy featuring a trans artist playing a cis character, opposite a cis artist playing trans. In a world where this inclusive ideal remains some way off, however, access of opportunity for underrepresented perspectives needs to take precedent over imaginative representations of those perspectives whenever possible.⁷

Here, the challenges Loughran and her team faced in navigating the different elements of their diversity practice find an important antecedent in the issues surrounding casting diverse races and genders. So-called colour and gender 'neutral' casting⁸ 'assumes one can and should be blind to race', as Shakespeare scholar Ayanna Thompson argues, but it also insists therefore that 'an actor's color has no semiotic value onstage unless it is invested with one by the director' (2011: 77). 'Neutral' casting may seem a valuable representational goal – a key means

of imaging diversity on stage – but its meritocratic basis (‘the best actor for the best part’, 2011: 77) also masks the systemic racism influencing the society in which it operates. In practice ‘neutral’ casting means that directors or artistic directors from dominant race, gender, ability or culture perspectives enjoy the freedom to determine what colour or gender will or will not signify in their performances, or who can pass as white, abled, heterosexual, or cis on their stages (that is, as not visibly too different from their expectations of what a part ‘looks’ like). ‘Neutral’ casting can also mean dissonance in role preparation for actors from different backgrounds. African-American theatre scholar Brandi Wilkins Catanese remembers playing Rosalind in a scene study in college; when her Orlando swore on Rosalind’s ‘white hand’ (*As You Like It* 3.2.355-6), she became acutely aware of her hand as *not white*, not Rosalind’s. She writes: ‘I took it as my responsibility to demonstrate my awareness of my nonnormative performing body, and to diminish its significance by laughing it off. I was, as David Wiles put it, “trying to live in the ‘world of the play’ while performing in the world of race”’ (2011: 10).⁹

In some important ways, Loughran’s *Comedy of Errors* represented the opposite of the situation Thompson and Catanese describe, but in others it risked replicating the problems that trail ‘neutral’ casting and its primary goal of diversity-as-image. Loughran describes her own rehearsal practice as ‘colour-conscious’: ‘creating space for an actor to bring their personal background and experience to the table insofar as they see it relating to the character, and [creating] a world where they can be in their own skin and in the world of the play [at the same time]’ (Loughran 2019b). Her concept for *Comedy* was intended as an ‘homage to the history, insights, and accomplishments of transgender and gender-fluid communities’, exploring ‘what it might take to establish, in the face of persecution, a community that is fiercely committed to inclusion, self-determination, and non-conformity’ (2018a). While informed to some extent by trans creators like Drake and James, the production was never intended to be *about* trans persons. It took inspiration from these communities and wished to honour them, but Loughran

well understood that it was able neither fully to include trans and non-binary artists in its development, nor to represent them in their own skins on stage. It was marketed (independent of Loughran's input) as gender-fluid, as edgy and diverse, as something other than Shakespeare-as-usual, but it was also every inch a product of the Stratford system, dependent on its repertory casting model and its expectations about Shakespeare's universal value for currency. Loughran's *Comedy* thus could not fully disrupt the in-built, white and patriarchal biases on which Stratford's cultural capital rests. We turn now to our ethnographic observations to explore in detail why.

Everybody's Shakespeare?

Many of the challenges facing diversity work at Stratford are rooted in the material realities that shape the Festival: in core aesthetic practices brought over (along with Shakespeare) during the European – and particularly British – colonization of Canada, as well as in the labour structures that help to perpetuate those practices. Stratford's signature aesthetic features a style of acting known as emotional realism (see Solga, 2010: 418), in which actors disappear into character, performing a version of Shakespeare's world as-real-world in a slightly heightened manner that prioritizes clear, elegant verse speaking. This style is typical of other mainstream Shakespeare companies in the Anglosphere such as the Royal Shakespeare Company, and it arises in part from the belief that Shakespeare's texts are the benchmark of human artistic achievement, that they can speak to everyone, and that they have something important to tell us about our world today. Emotional realism is also, however, a historical style grounded in European modernism: to become skilled at the work of emotional realism allows actors to gain elite status and currency on colonized terms. (High modern art revelled in 'exotic' colonial inspiration; Shakespeare was a key British colonial export.) At theatres like Stratford and the RSC, emotional realism and the elite cultural capital it signals on stage are traded with

audiences for the price of their tickets; offstage, this currency is replicated through centralized casting practices and internal training programmes like Stratford's Birmingham conservatory, where first-year actors are mentored by seasoned company veterans as they learn to recreate the Stratford aesthetic.

The Stratford aesthetic was crucial to the development of the Festival as a home for high theatrical art from its founding in 1952-53 through the end of the twentieth century. Under former Artistic Director Richard Monette in the late 1990s, Shakespeare began to wane in favour of more box-office friendly, 'populist' fare at Stratford, and that shift proved quite controversial (Parolin 2009: 203). When Monette's critics lamented the loss of Stratford's 'classical mandate' in favour of 'shameless populism' (203), however, they ignored his parallel interest in cementing Shakespeare as the pedagogical core of Stratford's drive to 'improve' audiences culturally. Monette argued for Shakespeare to become 'a touchstone figure who helped Stratford audiences' – and especially economically lucrative tourist audiences – 'measure their own development' (201; see also Ormsby 2017: 30), even as they enjoyed the range of entertainments on offer. Common to both Monette and his critics, then, was the belief that Shakespeare is great art that is good for everybody, regardless of our lived differences.

How does a company like Stratford square this circle, turn Shakespeare simultaneously into 'great art' and art 'for everybody'? The origin story behind Loughran's production of *Comedy* suggests one answer. Artistic Director Antoni Cimolino offered Loughran the play for the 2018 season; because it is customary that specific Shakespeare titles are pre-chosen and offered to directors, Loughran's choice was to accept or decline *Comedy*, rather than to choose between it and another play (Loughran 2018b, 2019b). Loughran was not a fan of *Comedy*, and explained to Cimolino her 'artistic dilemma' (Loughran 2019b) in taking on a play that she could not 'buy into' (Loughran 2018b); she struggled to see herself or her way of working in a slight play that features slave characters (the Dromios) and slapstick violence against them.

Not wanting to decline the opportunity, however, she read the text over and over again until she could begin to see ways to locate herself in it. With ‘encouragement and support from Cimolino’, she developed her ‘inclusive ethos of Ephesus that allowed for the diversity of casting I wanted and made the story exciting, contemporary and relevant to me’ (Loughran 2019b).

This trajectory reveals how Loughran’s production was rooted in her commitment to inclusive practice at the Festival, yet also constrained by the requirement that Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors* (the play as offered, more or less faithfully rendered) be the dramatic vehicle for that inclusion. As Loughran recounted, ‘declining the gig would have meant declining both desired artistic and economic opportunity. Accepting the contract meant delivering a production that I could get behind artistically and morally while also successfully engaging the Stratford audience and hopefully [its] critics’ (Loughran 2019b). While Loughran firmly asserts that the decisions she makes about assignments are all her own (agency she claims proudly as a woman of colour), in order to arrive at this one she had to take on a significant amount of extra labour: she had to find textual, material and performative ways to make *Comedy* support the opportunity and diversity work she insists upon. This extra labour was an unspoken (and likely unconscious) requirement of Cimolino’s offer, and it is a requirement many of-colour, female and queer directors face routinely. Loughran told us that the idea of questioning Cimolino’s choice of *Comedy* didn’t seem feasible to her at the time; as an artist of colour she did not see herself as privileged to press him very hard, despite their positive relationship (Loughran 2018b). Opportunities to direct Shakespeare in mainstream venues are rare and coveted for women (see Solga 2017), and Loughran’s remarks suggest a clear-eyed awareness of the power structures that constrain many non-white, non-male directors who are privileged to receive a Shakespeare offer at all. We might here productively place her comments in contrast to the experiences of prominent white and male directors like Robert

Lepage, who directed *Coriolanus* at the Festival in the same season as *Comedy*. Part of the ‘auteur’ identity ascribed to Lepage (or to Ivo Van Hove, or to Thomas Ostermeier) means that he is free or even expected, by virtue of international reputation and accrued cultural power, to approach a venue like Stratford confidently, and with a wish list.

Comedy is a challenging play to make inclusive: it opens with the potential execution of a foreigner for the crime of being a foreigner, builds its twin-reunion story on the backs of violence against slave characters, and yet is meant to be funny. Often in rehearsal we noted awkward dissonances arising from this challenge; they were especially tangible to us as the cast worked on staging the violence between the Antopholi and the Dromios on which so much of the play’s comedy hinges. At one point, for example, Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus ended up in a BDSM-style sequence featuring complex choreography based around a whip; although the sequence was shaped (by a fight director, in consultation with Loughran) to be light-hearted and executed with virtuosic skill by Khan and Laboucane, it resonated uneasily with us as spectators. We worried about the whip being misread by audiences unaware of the complexities of BDSM, reinforcing rather than undermining stereotypes about non-dominant sexual practices. Similar awkwardness arose for us in the fat jokes made continually at the expense of the kitchen maid Luce, performed cross-dressed by Stratford veteran Rod Beattie in a costume that played up Luce’s girth for comic effect.

In notes on an early draft of this chapter, Loughran asserted her belief that Shakespeare holds the power to speak across cultural, class and gender lines – not because his texts are ‘universal’ but because their very specificity contains the capacity to explore a range of contradictory human emotions and experiences. Her work on *Comedy* demonstrates her commitment to unpacking such contradictions: violence appears alongside acts of care between master and servant (especially where Hill and Bain were concerned); xenophobic laws rear up despite widespread gender inclusivity (Juan Chorian’s Duke exuded a strong hand but also a

thoughtful empathy throughout). But the extra labour that Loughran had to undertake simply to get *Comedy* onto the stage in a way that she could ‘get behind’ also demonstrates a contradiction rooted in the assumption that it is always part of the job of a ‘diverse’ director *to locate themselves* and their divergent experiences ‘in’ Shakespeare’s words, because those words are ‘good’ for us all, indeed are understood to be *better* than us all. Loughran recalls that Cimolino advised her to address her initial resistance to *Comedy* by ‘look[ing] beyond the superficial’ in the text to make it work (Loughran 2019b). But what if, rather than requiring directors like Loughran to make the ‘superficial’ in Shakespeare work *for* her, powerful institutions like Stratford gave her the full (and fully resourced) freedom to interrogate the contours and limits of Shakespeare’s presumed greatness instead?¹⁰

Beyond the repertory model

The paradoxical romance of Shakespeare’s simultaneous elite and populist power aside, the largest obstacle for diversity work at Stratford is its repertory model. This model enforces a top-down structure of artistic authority, and is closely linked to the Festival’s economic viability as it prioritizes efficiency of time, money and labour. At Stratford, where over a hundred actors are working in several shows over the course of the season, performers are organized into ‘tracks’ and guided by equity contracts that protect actors’ time and ensure their regular availability across all shows in which they are cast. Rules protecting workers’ health and guarding against discriminatory casting practices are crucial, but one of the consequences of the repertory rehearsal model is that casts experience disjointedness in their work together as a team, making it at times challenging to build a shared and inclusive vision for a production. The scenes worked at the rehearsals of *Comedy* we visited were governed by who was available when, with members of the cast coming in and out of the rehearsal space while they fit in work with their track’s other shows as well as costume fittings. The cast had few opportunities to

work holistically as a group with the show's trans consultants, Sunny Drake and Cassandra James, and were also limited in the time available to work together on the complex ethical questions at the heart of Loughran's vision for the play. What does it mean to 'play' with gender? What are the stakes involved in taking on a role that does not belong to your own identity or lived experience? Because individual members of Loughran's cast approached these questions with various levels of understanding of trans and non-binary experience, we observed several times a sense of actors' unease at not being quite sure how to do this work, how to get the non-binary components of the story-world right while *also* doing the jobs they were hired for: acting 'well' at the prestigious Stratford Festival.

For Loughran, the very process of actors working through discomfort when taking on aspects of identities that are unfamiliar to them is an example of diversity practice at work – and it is something she, as a woman artist of colour, has experienced from both sides. During their workshop, Drake and James specifically invited the cast to perform this kind of sympathetic imagining of otherness by making connections between their own experiences of difference and trans experience; the cast undertook this work thoughtfully, sharing with one another vulnerable experiences and also the limits of their understanding. However, this mode of working with another's identity as a kind of metaphor, of finding the other 'in' the self and the self in the other, brings risks. It assumes that every performer approaches this work on a level playing field, and that every identity can be appropriated with care and thoughtfulness by those outside. In theory – perhaps. But in practice, certain actors are required much more than others to locate themselves in those others' stories (think back to Catanese's experience playing Rosalind, above). In practice, this work requires significant invisible labour, a struggle to reconcile the ask with lived experiences (consider again Loughran's preparatory work on *Comedy*). Meanwhile actors who are white, cis or able-bodied are inherently privileged by the Shakespeare industry to adopt a range of identities on stage, secure in the knowledge that their

own experiences of selfhood are well and consistently represented in public spaces, in the media, and across the canon. Stratford continues to implicitly over-value the latter kind of imaginative inclusion; its ‘track’ system ensures that the most malleable and secure actors – actors who can shift across a range of productions and identity experiences apparently seamlessly – will be preferred over those who may be perceived as ‘stuck’ in the ‘politics’ of their own identities, or unable to read as ‘not different’ much of the time.

Loughran was, in the end, able to organize only one workshop on trans experience for the entire cast, which we attended in March 2018. The labour accomplished at this workshop may have been limited in scope, but it also set an important tone for the rest of the rehearsal process: it defined Loughran’s directorial practice as one based on shared vulnerability. We consistently observed her capacity to make space for multiple points of view during rehearsals, and her willingness to share artistic authority with her actors, which stood out as unusual within the Stratford system. But for this very reason, Loughran’s practice also chafed against that system in revealing ways. One particular observation from our research brings this tension between Loughran’s way of working and the norms supported by Stratford’s repertory model into stark relief.

On our third rehearsal visit, we watched the cast work with one of Stratford’s fight directors, who was choreographing some of the play’s slapstick comedy scenes. As is typical in large repertory companies, the fight director had not been present for the production’s entire rehearsal process, but came only periodically. We observed that this particular fight director was keen to assert his authority over the room: plainly comfortable in a position of power he had inhabited many times before, he referred to the female actors in the cast by pet names (love, dear), and did not shy away from touching them. His emphasis throughout the afternoon was on how to make the violence between the Antipholi and the Dromios funny, without paying attention to how certain kinds of humour (for example, burlesque pantomimes using BDSM-

style whips and chains) might not be appropriate for this production, or indeed funny for all actors or spectators. With his body centred on stage, in sharp contrast to Loughran's more inclusive and supportive style of directing from the gutter, the fight director repeatedly spoke over her direction, including at moments where she tried to intervene in his commands.¹¹

The fractured nature of rehearsal under the repertory system means these kinds of fly-in sessions are common; that same system also directly shapes a tightly regulated production schedule that leaves little room to make major changes during rehearsal. Loughran noted to us that many key decisions (for example, about setting, costuming, larger production 'story') for each show at Stratford must be made before rehearsals even start; even a well-intentioned, generous and open director like herself will thus ultimately have to make executive decisions for the show long before the actors arrive. If these decisions do not sit well with any of the actors once rehearsals begin, it is often too late for the system to address their issues in a thorough or satisfying manner. Younger actors or those newer to the Festival rank lower in the repertory hierarchy than many senior creative team members, and because actors in a repertory setting must appeal to multiple directors in order to be cast in a season, actors may not always feel comfortable expressing their unease over specific directorial choices. In *Comedy*, we observed this tension particularly regarding costuming.

Comedy's costumes were planned long before the cast began their work, by costume designer Joanna Yu in consultation with Loughran; again, this is typical of repertory production lines. Actors had limited power to request changes to costumes-in-process, which in turn had an effect on Loughran's foundational choice to invite cast members to explore and define for themselves their characters' gender identities. The costumes for the Duke and the Courtesan offer a case in point: featuring a tailored jacket and long, arresting silk skirt for the Duke (Juan Chorian), and a RuPaul-esque ensemble for the Courtesan (Sébastien Heins), they strongly influenced the character choices Chorian and Heins might adopt. As the cast expressed in Drake

and James' workshop, the social, political, and emotional stakes of performing identifications across sex and gender lines are high; they bring anxieties about taking on trans or non-binary roles and potentially offending queer community members, as well as anxieties about alienating more conservative audiences. We observed that Heins, the junior performer, was rendered especially vulnerable by his costume and the role to which it was attached.

Trans women experience the figure of the 'trans prostitute' as a stereotype, as James and Drake made very clear to the cast; the Courtesan in both character and costume was coded as one. In rehearsals we attended in March 2018, we observed Heins working with Loughran, James, and others to try to find the Courtesan's power as an independent economic agent and to convey that on stage, in contrast to the stereotype. As a young actor of colour still quite new to Stratford, however, it appeared to us that Heins was limited in his capacity to question the Courtesan's representation openly. This is partly a result of the constraints placed upon him by the costume's vivid look, partly a result of his perception of his own agency within a hierarchy in which he ranked relatively low, and partly a result of the primacy of Shakespeare's text at a theatre company where the bottom-line job is to stage works with as much fidelity as possible to a perceived original. The Courtesan spoke the text of the Courtesan, as written in *Comedy*; the costume was the costume, decided before Heins arrived on the scene. His job, then – not unlike Loughran's in her initial text work – was always going to be a matter of finding ways to reconcile his lines, role, and costume with a diversity practice it necessarily clung to awkwardly.

Finally – and most importantly – the structural exigencies of the repertory model best account for the lack of trans and non-binary performers in Loughran's production. During our March 2019 interview, Loughran explained fully why her repeated attempts to audition trans and non-binary performers for *Comedy* were unsuccessful. To join the Stratford company, an actor must first be on the radar of Stratford's casting director and then chosen by several

directors, each with a different vision for their work and different working practices; some may have no interest in diversity as a goal, or may be unwelcoming toward those who do not present as ‘a good fit’ for Stratford’s signature aesthetic (see Solga 2010: 439-40, note 19). For trans or gender non-conforming actors, for example, the likelihood that an identifiably trans or non-binary person will be welcomed onto a ‘track’ at Stratford is much less than for a cis actor. As both Drake (2016) and Frankland (see Masso 2018) have argued, opportunities remain thin on the ground for trans actors to perform in trans roles, let alone cisgendered roles. Actors will also need to relocate to Stratford – a relatively conservative small city that has not historically been welcoming to difference – for the season. Actors must thus be willing to leave networks of labour and/or emotional support behind, as well as potential opportunities to be cast in more fully inclusive productions elsewhere. For historically vulnerable and marginalized performers, there may be far less to be gained from a season at Stratford than lost in the sacrifice of community protection, meaningful work and income elsewhere.

What constitutes meaningful work will, of course, change depending on individual actors’ career and artistic interests, and it is crucial to acknowledge that not all marginalized actors are interested in taking on roles purely based on their ability to explore ‘diversity’, which often leads to harmful tokenism. Moreover, as with Loughran, actors working at Stratford exercise open-eyed agency when navigating the complex gains and losses involved in taking on any job. For some, the potential costs – leaving support networks behind, accepting limits on living situations for a season – are outweighed by the gains: long contracts, professional mentorship within a widely respected theatre network, and the opportunities to explore a variety of texts and roles in an environment supported by strong union standards. However, our various conversations with artists throughout this project have also reinforced for us that marginalized actors with fewer or smaller ‘own communities’ inside Stratford’s festival ecology can be more vulnerable to isolation and less willing or able to refuse requests that they

perform unpaid diversity work (for example, teaching others ‘about’ their communities as part of the rehearsal process, or supporting other vulnerable actors) alongside their acting labour, and thus end up more exhausted than anticipated.

This returns us again to the potential conflicts among representing diversity on stage as image, imagining inclusivity through identity-as-metaphor and developing a full diversity practice rooted in access for all to resources, artistic opportunities and the structural supports needed to ensure that vulnerable actors and team members are protected and mentored in a way that allows them to focus on the work they came to Stratford to do – acting – while recognizing that those supports will need to be different, and potentially more robust, than for other artists already well represented in the company. For a company like Stratford, opening up such access and opportunity more fully may begin with this rehearsal room question: *when we ask our actors to take on others’ identities, on what terms do we assume this work to be possible? Whose perspectives will this work inherently privilege? What investments would it take to bring those whose perspectives are elided by this very work properly into the room? And: how can we better foster communities for marginalized creators so that they can do their work safely?*¹²

A season at Stratford: who does the labour of ‘diversity work’?

Carrying out deep diversity work rests upon the capacity to value that labour distinct from the commercial profit it promises. We begin to comprehend the material value of diversity work when we start to ask the question of who is actually doing the bulk of its labour – and why. Unsurprisingly, the people tasked with taking on the most onerous diversity work tend to be those who are most vulnerable to the often invisible violence that is routinely permitted in non-diverse spaces: queer and trans people, women, people of colour, Indigenous persons, disabled people (see Ahmed 2017: 89-160; Hirsch 2019). In our post-show interviews with the cast of *Comedy*, the actors who had the most to say in response to questions about representations of

race in the text and the production were invariably actors of colour; these same actors – along with Loughran herself – were also the most likely to raise questions in rehearsal about the intersections of race, slavery and violence in the play.¹³

Our data here accords with remarks made by Quelemia Sparrow at the 2019 conference of the Canadian Association for Theatre Research in Vancouver. In her candid remarks during a plenary panel on Indigenous matriarchy in performance practice, Sparrow spoke of her experience working at the Festival in summer 2017, stating that she took on a significant amount of what she characterized as unpaid ‘consulting’ labour on *The Komagata Maru Incident*. She described her experience of this work as ‘traumatic’, explaining that she had come to Stratford to gain experience and status as one of its actors, but found herself instead having to carry the heavy weight of representing her entire culture on her shoulders (Sparrow 2019). Sparrow’s comments offer another reminder of the problematic nature of imaginative inclusion: good intentions may generate material harm for members of minority populations who have not been offered full access to creative processes that concern them. This experience of harm can also extend to audience members from those same communities: when we saw *Comedy of Errors* with a group of trans and non-binary audience members in September 2018, some of these audience members spoke of the harm they felt as they observed the production inadvertently turning unwelcome stereotypes into comic fodder. As Kara Raphaeli has noted in another context, ‘traditional mainstream representations of transgender characters have largely been damaging, treating the trans character as an object of curiosity, a punchline, a freak, a criminal, a tragic figure, and/or as a metaphor to better understand normative gender’ (2017: 3). While Loughran actively sought to resist these representations, some visual elements and choices made by her and her cisgendered cast brought their echo unhappily back into the room.

That echo returns us to one core challenge faced by artists seeking to build inclusive practices of Shakespeare production under the specific institutional and historical circumstances laid out by companies like the Stratford Festival. On one hand, Loughran's production accomplished critical diversity work in the sheer range of bodies (in terms of colour and age) it presented as normative: visibly diverse actors worked together to create an image of a shared world that was inclusive and open to a wide range of gender expressions. They drew on their own experiences, as well as those they learned from and about during the rehearsal process. For audiences, especially school-aged audiences, to see such expressions normalized and treated as joyful on a mainstream stage goes a long way toward normalizing those expressions elsewhere. On the other hand, because very few non-binary perspectives had access to the rehearsal room as this production evolved and its fine-grained choices were made, in several impactful ways it ended up alienating some audience members whose perspectives it wanted to honour as part of its mandate of inclusion. This paradox reminds us that representations of difference, even when crafted carefully, can only take us so far down the road. Who is on the stage matters, but who is in the room – who has some say in the narrative, including in the all-important narrative about who 'looks' what part – matters a good deal more (see also Frankland, 2018).

Loughran hired Drake and James as paid consultants on her production explicitly to bring their non-binary perspectives into her rehearsal room; she offered them as much creative influence as she had to give, and she told us that 'Sunny and Cassandra were pivotal in supporting the actors and myself in small choices moment to moment that pushed past stereotype and, we hoped, gave more status to any character who was trans or non-binary' (Loughran 2019b). But the amount of time Drake and James could spend with the cast was limited as a direct result of the constraints of Stratford's repertory model, and because they were hired in consulting rather than core creative roles their influence was necessarily partial.

Loughran has told us (Loughran 2019b) that she was clear with both Drake and James about the fact that no trans performers would appear in the show, which at that point had already been cast, and that she would fully understand if that meant they declined to consult on it; both chose to work with her and the cast nevertheless. We should remember, though, that despite this goodwill and honest protocol, Drake and James still found themselves in a Catch-22 position: willingly supporting a gender-inclusive production that continued to exclude trans actors from trans roles and opportunities, something Drake has written about with passion (2016).

In the end, Loughran was this production's primary diversity worker. She made *Comedy* 'work', and made it work inclusively, despite her initial reservations. She initiated outreach with Drake and James, knowing that, as a cis woman, she could not ethically realize her gender-inclusive vision alone. She ensured they could be paid and supported within the Stratford model so that the artistic and emotional labour they expended for *Comedy* was properly recognized and compensated. She consistently provided space for her cast to ask questions, and we witnessed her protect her actors when they experienced racialized or gendered microaggressions from outside. While it is possible to identify this production's limits with regards to equity, diversity, and inclusion as stemming in part from Loughran's approach to the text as a cis person, the production's many successes stemmed directly from her knowledge and experience gleaned through years of performing and directing as a visible woman of colour at Stratford.

Exhaustion is a common experience for those doing diversity work in the theatre. It is exhausting to fight for a place in the overdetermined canon of Shakespearean text and production, exhausting to create one's own new space for marginalized communities and narratives, exhausting to constantly experience racial, gendered, or ableist aggression along the way. It is exhausting to be the sole person to represent an entire, diverse community on stage and in the rehearsal room, and exhausting to educate those from dominant culture communities

– often without enough support or adequate compensation. As Loughran noted to us in our March 2019 interview (2019a), much as she applauds the commitments of her colleagues in senior management roles at the Festival to champion diversity initiatives, much of the work of *initiating* those initiatives and ensuring their proper follow-through has, in the recent past, fallen on her shoulders. No wonder she was tired enough to need a break.

This chapter is about ‘Shakespeare and Ethics’; in it, we have explored the difficult choices surrounding the process of diversifying Shakespeare in performance, including the tension between ‘doing’ diversity at the many levels of creative practice that go into building a show, and staging diversity in order to ‘represent’ a more inclusive vision of our world. While exploring this tangle of issues, we have also spent time thinking through the differences between diversity as a guiding principle for *artistic practice*, as Loughran experiences it in the context of imagining characters and stories beyond her own, and diversity *as a matter of access* – of granting space in the development or rehearsal room to artists from marginalized communities whose own stories have never accurately or respectfully been told in mainstream spaces, and whose artistic survival has long depended on their capacity to imagine themselves into dominant-culture frameworks, on the dominant culture’s terms.

Diversity work – the work of building more inclusive, equitable practices in relation to staging Shakespeare, talking about Shakespeare, and even writing about Shakespeare – is hard work, for all involved. To get to this moment in our chapter, we have experienced that hard work firsthand. In our discussions with Loughran we have struggled to comprehend one another’s perspectives on diversity and inclusion, to respect the differences between them, and to articulate the evidence from our copious data as fairly as possible in order to represent both.

We have sought to address students and colleagues reading this book, in an effort to help them understand the difficulty and urgency of the issues at stake; we have also sought to address readers working at the Stratford Festival, in an effort to help them recognize some of the structural problems still standing in the way of the inclusive practices they intend for their theatre company. Above all, we have sought to recognize the artists whose diversity work goes unseen every day; this chapter is an effort to let their work be seen.

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Notes

¹ We owe enormous thanks to Keira Loughran for her generosity in opening her rehearsal spaces and her directorial process to our observation; she has been central to the crafting of this chapter and has pushed us all along the way to see our divergent perspectives in thoughtful counterpoint.

² For more on practicing diversity in theatre and performance contexts, see Alvarez et al 2018.

³ For a thorough introduction to ethics in relation to the theatre, see Ridout 2009.

⁴ As of the 2016 Census reporting period, the population of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) was more than 51% visible minority and 47% foreign-born; this compares with 29% (Ontario) and 22% (Canada as a whole) for both markers. Statistics Canada (2017) provides a detailed demographic breakdown.

⁵ ted's role at the Festival includes helping review the first half of the ten-year mandate Cimolino developed for Stratford at the beginning of his Artistic Directorship, and to shape the Festival's diversity development for the next five years (witzel 2018).

⁶ During the production process of this chapter, the playbill for the 2020 season – subsequently aborted owing to the Covid-19 outbreak – became available, with initial creative team information. Amaka Umeh was slated play Hamlet on the Festival's main

stage, as well as Anne Boleyn in the same season's production of *Wolf Hall*, which included black performers in the roles of Henry VII and Cranmer. Stratford legend Colm Feore – a non-disabled actor – was cast as Richard III. Loughran was announced to direct *Wendy and Peter Pan* in the Avon theatre in a production featuring actors of colour as both Wendy and Peter, and a female Captain Hook; Jessica Carmichael (mixed, non-status Abénaki/Euro) would direct an all-Indigenous cast in Tomson Highway's *Rez Sisters* in the Studio Theatre; and Alisa Palmer (white, queer) would direct *Hamlet – 911*, an original play by her and partner Ann-Marie MacDonald, also in the Studio.

⁷ This inclusive ideal can already be seen, for example, in Ravi Jain and Why Not Theatre's 2017 *Prince Hamlet* ([Why Not 2019](#)) – notably, an adaptation of the Shakespeare text rather than a 'faithful' version – and Soulepper Theatre's 2019 all-Indigenous-led production of Daniel David Moses' *Almighty Voice and His Wife*, under the new artistic directorship of black Canadian artist Wenyi Mengasha.

⁸ Responding to recent calls from disability scholarship and activism to use language around disabled experience with increasing thoughtfulness, we here employ the term 'neutral casting' in place of the commonly used 'blind casting'. We also recognize the crucial body of work by artists and scholars of colour under the term 'blind casting' around accessible stage practice, and will continue to use the term when directly citing the work of those scholars. As Thompson (2011) and Catanese's (2011) work addresses, 'blind' casting is far from neutral. Our use of the term 'neutral casting' assumes a similar reflexive scepticism.

⁹ For more on the repercussions of specifically "colourblind" casting models, particularly in the UK context, see Rogers 2013; Hyland 2015; Espinosa 2016.

¹⁰ Ric Knowles (2004a, 2004b) has consistently raised important critiques of Stratford's resistance to taking this kind of risk. For an alternative take on the Festival's relationship to risk-taking, see Solga 2010.

¹¹ The Festival has now begun to factor diversity-forward practices into rehearsal labour by hiring intimacy choreographers (for the first time in *Bakkhai* in 2017, and again for *Othello* in 2019). Loughran has had some intimacy training (Loughran 2019b), and we observed clearly her capacity to support and check in with her cast, especially during this fight choreography session.

¹² As this article went to press, a group of Black artists spoke to the struggle of working at the Festival and in the larger Canadian theatre industry on YouTube as part of the official 'Meet the Festival' program of talks. The honest, generous, and raw discussion reflected much of what we heard elsewhere during our research (Stratford Festival 2020).

¹³ In accordance with our ethics protocol, and in order to protect company members from any potential economic or social harm, we have fully anonymized all actor comments and feedback and refrained from quoting actor-interviewees directly. This is standard ethics practice when working with potentially vulnerable subjects.