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Performance Review of Zoom Shakespeare: The Show Must Go Online and “Read for the Globe”

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Performance Review of Zoom Shakespeare: *The Show Must Go Online* and “Read for the Globe”
Streamed live on YouTube

The Show Must Go Online series launched on March 19, 2020

“Read for the Globe” launched May 23, 2020

The Show Must Go Online created by Rob Myles

“Read for the Globe” Co-founders: Sophie Allin, Catriona Bolt, Katherine Corner, Ben Kingcox, Elise Lamsdale, Alex Mason, Jamie McGeown, Olivia Perrett, Madeleine Saidenberg, and Regine Vital.

Photos (Screenshots): Permissions granted by the author, with permission from Rob Myles

Less than a fortnight into the COVID-19 lockdown¹, Rob Myles had a plan: using Zoom as a platform and live-streaming to YouTube, *The Show Must Go Online*², a weekly series that would work its way through Shakespeare’s canon³, was born. Beginning with what is believed to be Shakespeare’s first play, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* debuted on March 19th. Anticipation for the series’ launch garnered online publicity across the theatrical globe, appearing in outlets such as *Aussie Theatre*, *Broadway World*, *Playbill*, and *Time Out London*, to name a few. To date, the production has been viewed over 65,000 times⁴ and features actors from around the globe.

Because *The Show Must Go Online* launched so early into the tumultuous season of quarantined life, it inadvertently created a model for how lock-down performances might function. This is not to say that virtual theatre did not exist prior to this launch; it certainly did, but the virtual theatre landscape that existed in a time when all *could* gather looks quite different from the kind of online performance experience that emerged when audiences could *not* gather. In March of 2020, there was a simultaneous surge of broadcast theatre: pre-recorded performances that were made available for viewers to stream at home. These productions (notably those broadcast by Shakespeare’s Globe, the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company, and the Public Theatre’s production of *Much Ado About Nothing*) were archival performances of works that were produced for live theatre. With *The Show Must Go Online*, Rob Myles set the virtual stage for artists to consider how they might use the soon to be ubiquitous platform Zoom to create performance that would not have been possible without it. In this essay, I will focus on the distinct components of *The Show Must Go Online* that paved the way for other

Zoom-based performances of Shakespeare, including the “Read for the Globe”⁵ 48-hour readathon fundraiser for Shakespeare’s Globe (of which I was a part).

At present⁶, *The Show Must Go Online* has been airing performances weekly, with over 130,000 views (in over 50 countries), and engaging with over 300+ creatives thus far.⁷ Over the course of 16 weeks, the production values have increased greatly as the creative team has become even more proficient at producing work using Zoom. They have gone from what acting instructors call “passing the parcel” (sharing props between two or more individuals to create a shared landscape), to adding musical cues to their transitions, editing in pre-recorded fight scenes, and even using social media filters in order to create special effects. Rob Myles’ portrayal of Bottom in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was applauded widely on social media for his appearances with a digital ass’s head fixed atop his shoulders (Fig. 1).

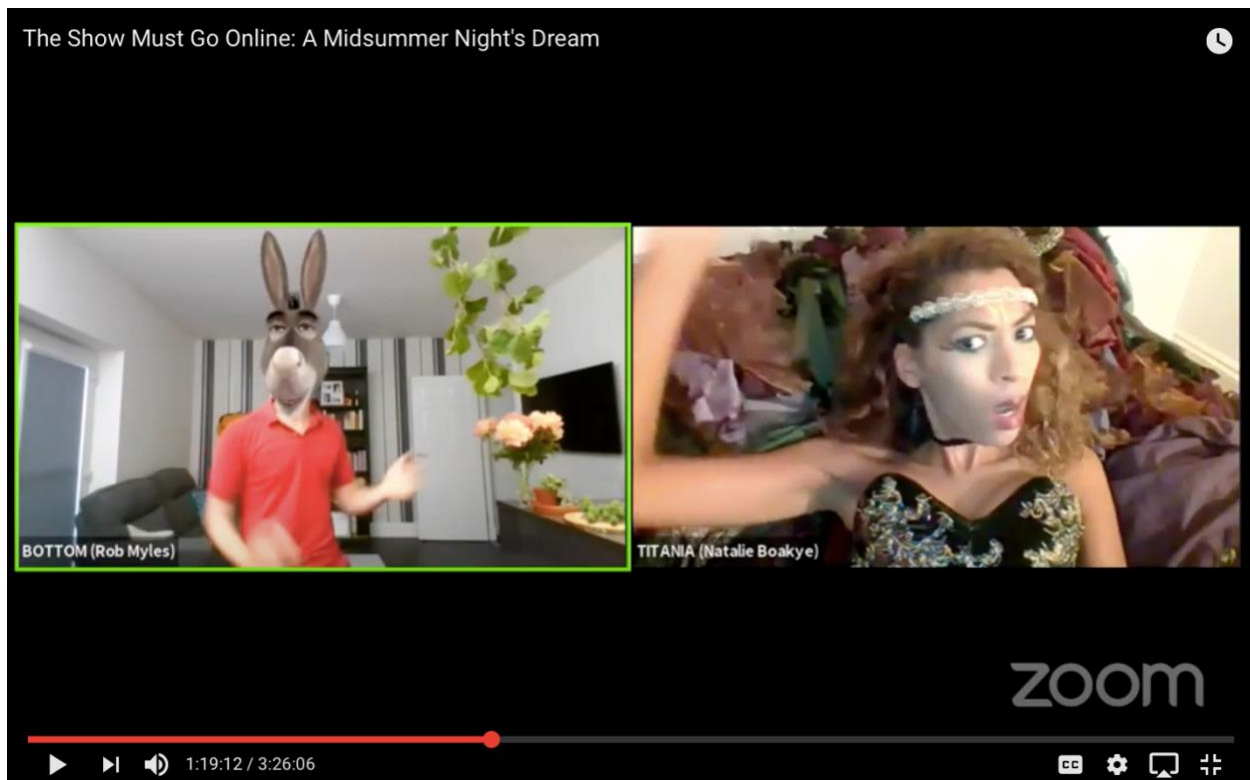


Fig. 1: Screenshot, *TSMGO’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (taken by the author).

Each performance of *The Show Must Go Online* (*TSMGO*, as it is frequently referred to) features an introduction to the play by a leading scholar/practitioner, one who helps to create a context for the viewership, much like the dramaturgical front matter you would find in a performance program. Curated (and often led) by Shakespeare scholar/practitioner Ben Crystal,

these introductions include significant historical facts, themes that have been identified in the play, questions surrounding production history or problems in staging, as well as key relevant plot points.

One of *TSMGO*'s most noteworthy components is the sense of community that the series has generated. Affectionately calling themselves "groundlings", a growing group of familiar audience members gather weekly, welcoming each other back in the pre-show comments, and using the chat feature to create amongst them a shared experience that could not exist in a quiet theatre, where codes of behavior would prohibit the simultaneous engagement of both the play and the communal theatre-going experience. The community forged amongst this international group includes members who have themselves performed in the series. Here, the lines between insider and outsider are deliberately blurred, and Shakespeare really does become 'our contemporary' as new fan art/media emerge from this loyal group.

The sense of burgeoning community in isolation extends to other arenas as well. There is a vocal presence on Twitter that expands the experience from the digital correspondences found in the YouTube chat onto the online platform and beyond. As a result, there may be insider chat within the performance on YouTube, and a more public 'outsider' chat happening in the Twittersphere. Loyal groundlings create memorabilia such as fan art (Annabelle Higgins) and gifs from the series (Ksenia); they even coin 'catch phrases' that capture the experience of shared community between them (Eugenia Low)⁸.

On May 18, 2020, Shakespeare's Globe announced that they were in dire financial trouble as a result of the closures brought about by COVID-19. The Globe has depended exclusively on revenue from ticket sales, exhibition tours, merchandise, education programs and private donations, and with the Globe closed, there was an impending financial disaster on the horizon. A group of former MA students at Kings' College⁹ in the Shakespeare and Performance program created "Read for the Globe" a 48-hour readathon to raise money to help save Shakespeare's Globe (May 23-25, 2020). Many of the groundlings and artists who are part of *The Show Must Go Online* community joined in this endeavor. What is striking about this landscape of online performance is how audience members forge quick ties as a collective unit, often through the shared communications of social media, like Twitter.

By live-tweeting performance reactions – particularly to unexpected events like elements of staging, innovative use of props, and moments of shared responses to plot and performance,

Zoom Shakespeare audience members become part of a virtual Shakespeare fandom. In “Read for the Globe”, the nature of its non-stop reading, coupled with a social media presence, created a sense of community that was fueled by its collective, multi-platform experience. “Read for the Globe” also featured tweets from participating actor/readers in their latent moments of performance, providing an insider’s view to the event that positioned the tweeter firmly as a part of the shared community with the audience.

The fact that this kind of shared community was forged at a time when there was extreme physical isolation is not lost. While an individual may be entirely alone at home, they are not alone when they gather with newfound friends through a shared love of Shakespeare. That this community is a global one is even more noteworthy at a time when it is practically impossible to travel. The rising “Go Fund Me” ticker the “Read for the Globe” audience followed alongside the plays further heightened the excitement. When the original goal of raising £5,000 was quickly met, the target was moved incrementally, ultimately raising £13,327¹⁰.

Whereas *The Show Must Go Online* has a creative team including casting director Sydney Aldridge, who casts each play in advance, the casting for “Read for the Globe” occurred at the top of each reading, giving readers virtually no time to prepare, and amplifying the sense of anticipation, much like the improvisatory experience of many cue-script productions of Shakespeare.¹¹ The “Read for the Globe” ensemble featured a range of readers: from students and amateurs to professional actors, some of whom, like Jessica Warbeck (whose midnight performance of *Lady Macbeth* was lauded) had performed previously at the Globe itself¹².

What is noteworthy about both of these projects is the support they have garnered from the academic community. In both projects, Shakespeare scholars from around the world have lent their expertise. In addition to Ben Crystal, *TSMGO* has been introduced by academics (and practitioners) such as Grace Ioppolo, Eric Rasmussen, and Jemma Levy. “Read for the Globe” was joined by the legendary Stephen Greenblatt, who appeared as Edmund in *King Lear*. It speaks to the current moment, where there is an urgent need to connect, that communities such as these two would draw participants from the academy and the profession, from amateurs, and Shakespeare lovers alike.

On their YouTube channels, both *TSMGO* and “Read for the Globe” provide free content that is readily available, with the request for donations. Patreon support for *TSMGO* begins as low as £1.20 per month—literally just pennies a performance—and features exclusive content for

its patrons.¹³ Several community-building initiatives have been introduced as the series progressed: from *TSMGO* ‘Bingo’ cards to tick the boxes while watching along¹⁴, to a rainbow-themed ‘groundlings’ party to wrap up a month of Pride-filled celebrations (July 1, 2020). These events serve to strengthen the online community; they simulate togetherness, even in isolation. And this is one of the most significant aspects of the ‘groundling’ experience: across the globe the communal experience of being a member of an audience, where one enters a theatre as an individual and becomes part of a collective¹⁵ remains intact. So even if photos and screenshots of rainbow-colored snacks and colorful attire can’t be seen from the isolation of one’s computer screen, the event is shared across the common bond of fandom.

A prime example of how *TSMGO* has branched out into fandom can be found in the coinage of “poig”: *TSMGO* shorthand for “poignant”. While watching *Henry IV part I* on June 24, 2020, ‘groundling’ Eugenia Low responded, “It is so poig” (1:32:42) to Jack Baldwin’s interpretation of Falstaff’s reaction “Banish not him thy Harry’s company. Banish not him thy Harry’s company” (1:31:57-1:32:03). Low quickly corrected to, “Poignant, I meant to say” (1:32:54), but “poig” was officially born, sparking on-going conversation in the chat feature: “@EugeniaLow I figured that was some cool hip abbreviation the youngsters are using these days”, shared Ian Doescher, author of fanfic titles such as the 9-volume *William Shakespeare’s Star Wars* series, the 3-volume collection of Pop Shakespeare *Much Ado About Mean Girls, Get Thee ... Back to the Future*, and *The Taming of the Clueless* (among others).¹⁶ Twenty minutes later, “poig” was certainly still a part of chat, prompting Lynn Kutner to proclaim, “Poig needs to go on the bingo” (1:54:06) – which it promptly did (Fig. 2).



THE SHOW MUST
GO ONLINE

POIG!

DEATH	HATS	HOUSE PLANTS	CULINARY BLOOD	HISTORY LESSON IN THE CHAT
KITCHEN UTENSIL	SNACKS	COLOR CODING	PROP PASSING	SWING SAVE
ALUMNI	MENAGERIE	POIG	MUTE	FLAT PARKOUR
SINGING	CHOREO	FIGHT SCENE	DISGUISE	INNOVATION of the WEEK
SPECIAL EFFECTS	SAUCY PRIEST	PERFECT ZOOM WINDOW BLOCKING	ACTORS FROM THREE CONTINENTS	INVITE SOMEONE TO WATCH TSMGO

MADE IN @CANVA BY @JAZZALOTTE

Fig.2: Screenshot of *TSMGO* Bingo card, created/posted by @Jazzalotte, Twitter 6/24/20 (taken by the author).

TSMGO provides viewers with a bifurcated performance experience, one where audience members undertake dual modes of engagement. When watching live, the focus is on both the performance of Shakespeare's play as well as the connection and interaction of shared liveness. When watching a replay of a past performance on YouTube, a spectator is privy to two performances of which they can only remain on the outside: the (recorded) performance of the play, as well as a record of the dialogical response to the live event through the chat feature which replays in perpetuity alongside the performance.¹⁷ From a historical perspective, this is a curious phenomenon, one that reveals the audience response to a production, even if it is limited to a select (vocal) few. I'd like to suggest that *The Show Must Go Online* and other Zoom/YouTube performances of Shakespeare during the COVID-19 pandemic are worthy of a much larger study; that this brief consideration merely scratches the surface of what can be learned from such projects – and about audiences' relationships to theatergoing at a time when theatres are necessarily "dark".

¹ This author was already on lockdown in New York; lockdown in the UK occurred later, with theatres ordered closed on March 20th and the official UK lockdown beginning on March 26th – meaning that *TSMGO* began even before the official orders of lockdown were issued. *TSMGO* launched its first Tweet on March 13, 2020.

² *The Show Must Go Online* (Rob Myles' YouTube channel). <https://www.youtube.com/user/robmyles>. Accessed June 29, 2020.

³ "We're using the Wikipedia chronology as it's universally accessible and ultimately there'll always be debate, so we're using the 'wisdom of crowds'!" shared director Rob Myles in the YouTube comments (<https://youtu.be/KOAHj4ANGKw>).

⁴ As of July 6, 2020

⁵ “Read for the Globe”, Parts 1-5.

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCoP9oZUzCT9UA4tIhIm6NgA>. Accessed June 29, 2020.

⁶ June 2020

⁷ Rob Myles, introduction to *Henry IV, part I* (2:22-2:33).

⁸ At times, there is a discrepancy between the names found in the YouTube chat, where individuals may add an “@” sign before someone’s name (when replying/referencing a previously made comment), which is not necessarily the same as the Twitter handle of the individual. Some ‘groundlings’ use their given names in the chat, but have Twitter handles that are not necessarily name-based.

⁹ “Read for the Globe” Co-founders: Sophie Allin, Catriona Bolt, Katherine Corner, Ben Kingcox, Elise Lamsdale, Alex Mason, Jamie McGeown, Olivia Perrett, Madeleine Saidenberg, and Regine Vital.

¹⁰ Go Fund Me (Read for the Globe). <https://www.gofundme.com/f/9p2gkh-read-for-the-globe>. Accessed June 29, 2020.

¹¹ As a component of some Original Practices performances, cue-script performances of Shakespeare are defined by the absence of a traditional rehearsal process. Actors receive their part of the play along with their cues, but refrain from staging the play with their fellow actors, aside from moments of stage violence and/or musical interludes.

¹² Warbeck appeared as Desdemona in the 2018 production of *Othello* at Shakespeare’s Globe alongside Andre Holland and Mark Rylance.

¹³ Launched on March 28, 2020, “Shakespeare Happy Hours” follows a similar structure: 90-minute performances of Shakespeare’s plays, featuring an international cast, including world-renowned actors such as Colin Hurley (a Shakespeare’s Globe veteran). Produced by Rude Grooms (Queens, NY) and Seven Stages Shakespeare Company (Portsmouth, NH), Patreon patrons receive exclusive insider perks such as backstage conversations and drinks after the show, merchandise discounts and producer credits. Patreon support for Shakespeare’s Happy Hours is based on a per-stream event, rather than *TSMGO*’s model of monthly membership.

¹⁴ Created by Charlotte Reese (@Jazzalotte).

¹⁵ McAuley, Gay. *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999.

¹⁶ *TSMGO* has produced four readings of Ian Doescher’s Pop Shakespeare works in conjunction with Quirk Books: *William Shakespeare’s Star Wars* (May 4, 2020, known to *Star Wars* fans as ‘May the fourth’), *The Taming of the Clueless* (May 11, 2020), *Much Ado About Mean Girls* (May 18, 2020), and *Get Thee Back to the Future* (May 25, 2020).

¹⁷ The chat feature recedes from view when a viewer selects the “full screen” viewing option.