

Introduction

Seriality, reboots and iterability on the Anglophone contemporary stage: an introduction

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The COVID-19 pandemic might have felt like a reboot in the theatre world. As the pandemic shut down theatres and productions, it forced theatre-makers and institutions to *adapt* to this unprecedented halt: though many of them had already ventured into the realm of on-line and virtual performance pre-lockdown, the pandemic accelerated a re-thinking of the essence of live performance and a reassessment of the place (and spaces) of theatre in our contemporary societies. As Margherita Laera writes, theatre's constant returns, rewritings and repetitions are the markers of its capacity to "[adapt] itself to present contingencies and situations, like an animal species struggling to survive through evolution" (1). Theatre is subject to a paradox anchored in its very nature as live spectacle. It is a repetitive, re-iterable and rehearsed act, a (more or less) scripted performance that occurs several nights a week, as Richard Schechner explains: "Performance means: never for the first time. It means: for the second to the nth time. Performance is 'twice-behaved behavior'" (37). Yet, no performance is ever a complete replica of the previous one: "Existing as 'second nature,' restored behavior is always subject to revision" (Schechner 38). Theatre is an art of variations, each performance a slight tweaking of the text, the staging or the audience reception. Therefore, the serial and iterable nature of theatre inherently points to the transformative power of adaptation, which Linda Hutcheon defines as "repetition without replication, bringing together the comfort of ritual and recognition with the delight of surprise and novelty" (173). The audience's

pleasure therefore lies in the tense point of balance between returns and defamiliarization, understood as a process of transformation. This process does not simply deal with the poetics of iteration: as Laera suggests, “[t]heatre [...] does not reshape its coordinates simply to remain alive or to remain itself through time, but also to change the world around it” (1). Assimilating theatre’s capacity to transform with its potential to “change the world” alludes to a possible *politics* of iteration, hinting at the social and cultural reboots these (re)iterations might reflect and/or bring about.

It is precisely the transformative and performative power of these reboots and (re)iterations that this issue of *Coup de Théâtre* explores through the contributions that constitute this volume on seriality, reboots and iterability on the contemporary Anglophone stage. Envisioning contemporary theatre through its “returns” (“Theatre returns, it always does.” [Laera 1]) more than its break with past texts, performances and dramatic models might appear counterintuitive. Yet, in keeping with Agamben’s definition of the contemporary, these dynamics of continuity and rupture, returns and departures are precisely what makes theatre’s true contemporaneity:

The one who truly belongs to his time, the true contemporary, does not perfectly coincide with his time nor does he adhere to its pretensions – in that sense, the true contemporary may be defined as untimely. But precisely for that reason, precisely because of this discrepancy and anachronism, he is more capable than others of perceiving and seizing his time.¹ (our translation)

What Agamben’s vision of the contemporary implicitly reveals is the political weight of these dynamics of return and departure: envisioning contemporary theatre as anchored in past texts, performances and motifs also allows for a better grappling of the contemporary political, social and cultural contexts in which plays are created and performed. The reiteration of history onstage can therefore reboot historical episodes to question their continuing impact on contemporary societies, such as in Suzan Lori-Parks’ *Topdog/Underdog* (2001): as the play stages the reenactment of Abraham Lincoln’s assassination by two

Black brothers (Lincoln and Booth), reenactment becomes a theatrical practice that allows for layers of time to coexist on stage. Those reiterations of History, as Rebecca Schneider theorizes in *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (2011), are variations through which the multifaceted dimension of History can emerge and lead us to question our relation to the “now” (Schneider 87).

The choice of terms as varied as seriality, reboots and iterability alludes to the number of formal and thematic means through which these transformations occur. The contributions of this volume deal with a heterogeneous body of plays, which highlights the centrality of reinventions in contemporary Anglophone drama, and the multiple reboots (formal, poetic or political) they offer.

Over the years, literal re-performances, multimedia performances based on repetitions and variations, have been developed, most notably for the US stage, by the Wooster Group and its many *bricolages* (*Vieux Carré*, 2009, or *The Town Hall Affair*, 2016) or the repetitive reboots of plots and modes of staging suggested by the Real Time Editing of the Big Art Group (Lemoine 2013, 2020a). In terms of dramatic texts, repetitive motifs and iterations might both suggest the redundancy of the cliché or signal a reboot of the signifier – its meaning visually (on the page) and aurally (on the stage) distorted, made strange, and ultimately, perhaps, redefined. One aspect that is particularly telling of the aesthetic resetting of theatre is perhaps the reboot of older dramatic models or old myths. This resetting has either favored their rejuvenation or complete explosion, such as in Sarah Kane’s *Phaedra’s Love* (1996), which drastically uses mythology to blast open the codes of the tragedy and marshal the obscene onto the stage, “in-yer-face” (Sierz 107-112). Twenty years later, In-Yer-Face theatre has itself become a canon to be reiterated (Angel-Perez 2021) or refashioned to become In-Yer-Ear (Angel-Perez 2022), while the Greek myths are still constantly being reworked and rebooted. Branden Jacob-Jenkins’ *Girls* (2019), a rewrite of Euripides’ *The Bacchae*, transforms the menacing chorus into a celebratory and liberating polyphony (Lemoine

2020b), while in *Paradise* (2021), Kae Tempest offers a renewed feminist perspective on the Trojan War, thus forging “an epic new take on the Greek legend” (National Theatre). Myths are especially prone to being rebooted and therefore transformed since, as Barthes reminds us in *Mythologies*, “[m]ythical speech is made of a material which has *already* been worked on” (108). If the classical material of tragedy is malleable, dramatic forms also become pliant and subject to reinventions. Myths permeate literary and theatrical histories – each time retold, with small variations, making them the most tractable of source materials. As a result, this adaptability contaminates the dramatic forms that enabled the circulation of myth: dramatic codes and generic conventions, often envisioned as serving a rigid continuity, are therefore twisted, reinvented – made tensile through slight variations. Contemporary plays that consist in a variation on myth therefore emphasize that reboots are constantly caught in a dialogue with past dramatic forms and themes. A similar dialogue occurs with rewritings of canonical dramatic texts. The Shakespearean canon is an especially fertile terrain to study under the lens of its transformations, prolongations and iterations, either to pay homage to it or to reject it (Saunders 2017, Angel-Perez 2017). Because the text of Shakespeare’s plays is often envisioned as “a fixed point against which theatrical production can be monitored” (Kidnie 2), adaptations of Shakespearean works are often considered an alteration, even a defacing of the original text and of the work’s authenticity. On the other hand, the vast number of new, actualized productions and rewritings that recontextualize the performance or alter Shakespeare’s text seems to signal that these transformations are to be envisioned “in a reciprocal relation to the Shakespearean ‘work’” (Kidnie 5). Moving past issues of (in)fidelity to the original, the questions raised by the notions of seriality, reboots and iterability poke at the malleable nature of texts and performances, and at theatre’s capacity to adapt to or resist socio-cultural and political changes. Each new iteration or reboot of the Shakespearean canon is “an ongoing process” that “reshapes in significant ways the politics of reception” (Kidnie 6).

Indeed, the notion of reception is key if we are to understand the issues raised in this volume. As these (re)iterations and reboots reveal theatre's capacity to adapt to the context in which plays are produced, they often strive to correct a dramatic material seen as old-fashioned, dated and out of touch with the changing concerns of its audiences. Several contributions in this volume focus on the ways reiterations of the Shakespearean canon unearth gender or racial issues that were only ghostly traces in Shakespeare's texts: far from simply pointing out the supposed "flaws" of the source material, these iterations enrich and expand the hypotext. This enrichment, because it re-integrates voices and bodies that were previously obfuscated or "otherized", such as those of women, often appears as an attempt to re-politicize the canon, potentially countering its tendency to conservatism, and echoing audiences' collective concerns surrounding issues of gender and/or race. Similarly, Golden Age musicals from the 1920s until the 1960s are especially prone to being "revived", resuscitated, as they are often embedded in dated conservative discourses and practices. Revivals of such musicals not only aim to correct the dramatic text (such as Suzan Lori-Parks' rewriting of the 1935 Gershwin opera *Porgy and Bess* in 2012 or Lin-Manuel Miranda's translation and adaptation of certain lyrics of *West Side Story* into Spanish in 2009) but they also are a terrain of experimentation in casting practices (see for instance the nontraditional casting of the 1943 musical *Oklahoma!* in 2019, in which Ali Stroker became the first wheelchair-user to be awarded a Tony for her performance as Ado Annie). But those corrective intents are often selective, necessarily incomplete or insufficient, precisely because they often generate hybrid works that negotiate the dated dimension of the original text while using performance as a counter-discourse. By superimposing layers of meaning that are often contradictory, those plays shed light on issues of representation and identity as political terrains of contestation.

Transcultural adaptations and transpositions are especially fruitful examples when it comes to showing the way "context conditions meaning" (Hutcheon 145). When theatre crosses its national borders and is iterated in cultural environments far removed from its original

context of production, issues of reception intersect with political discourse. This act of “transculturation” or “indigenization,” as Linda Hutcheon calls it, borrowing the latter term from Susan Stanford Friedman (Hutcheon 150), once again takes many different shapes. Translations, rewritings or adaptations to specific local genres or practices dis-locate (and re-locate) plays and performances within a specific cultural context: “Local particularities become transplanted to new ground, and something new and hybrid results” (Hutcheon 150). The circulation of plays in a globalized world therefore engages in a complex interplay between audiences, the source material that is transformed, and the form of said transformation that often resonates with local cultural and/or theatrical practices. Processes of “indigenization,” more specifically those that relocate Western drama in different cultural contexts (like Monadhil Daoud Albayati’s *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* [2012], or Koumarane Valavane’s adaptation of the same play, set this time in the context of the Indian castes in *Chandala* [2019]), entail a political project – one that counters dominant discourses and representations and that “implies agency” (Hutcheon 150): “Adapters of traveling stories exert power over what they adapt” (Hutcheon 150).

Therefore, when thinking about seriality, reboots and iterability, issues of power always resurface. The delicate intersection between text and context, performance and audiences, becomes a conflictual space in which the tensions and debates surrounding identity and issues of (in)visibility can be expressed. This is mirrored in the three parts that structure this issue. The first part of the volume, entitled “Furious echoes of a cry out: Rewriting the Shakespearean and Greek classics from a feminist perspective” broaches on issues related to adaptation of the canon.

The first two articles focus on the Shakespearean canon and how its adaptations may or may not facilitate feminist interpretations.

Juliette MÉZERGUES’ article on Howard Barker’s 2002, *Gertrude - The Cry* adapted from *Hamlet* focuses on the repetition of the Cry, a character in itself. It shows that even a play written by a

“white middle-aged man” can perform a “female gaze” and interrogate categories such as passive / active, pairs such as Eros and Thanatos, or concepts like identification since, according to Iris Brey, what matters is the decentering of the gaze and not the gender of the creator. The article, written in French, also compares the dramaturgical choices made by The Wrestling School in England in 2002 and Giorgio Barberio Cordetti at the Odéon in Paris in 2009.

Estelle RIVIER-ARNAUD claims with Hutcheon (2006) that adaptation is necessary to make original works relevant for the contemporary context. To prove the continuing relevance of that statement, she focuses on four adaptations of *Othello* and *King Lear* written and performed by/ for/with women. By comparing the Shakespearean hypotexts and their contemporary hypertexts, RIVIER-ARNAUD wonders whether the feminist plays in her transgenerational and transnational corpus (Elaine Feinstein’s *Lear’s Daughters* (1987), Paula Vogel’s *Desdemona, a Play About a Handkerchief* (1994), Marina Carr’s *The Cordelia Dream* (2008) and Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona* (2012)) are “revisionings” (Iyengard 59) or aim at “exorcising the past” (Kidnie 70).

The next two articles focus on adapting classical Greek tragedies.

Sara SONCINI analyses the reprisal of a specific theatrical device, namely the chorus, in two plays performed in 2021 – Kae Tempest’s *Paradise* (National Theatre) and Lucy Kirkwood’s *Maryland* (Royal Court Theatre). Both were prompted by the refugee crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced playwrights to interrogate the notion of “being-in-common” from a political and aesthetic perspective. By entrusting a specifically female chorus to speak (and shout or cry, as in MÉZERGUES’ article), Tempest and Kirkwood try to elicit “an ethical and empathetic response” meant to fill the civic function of healing the community through the “echo-chamber of the female voice”.

Like RIVIER-ARNAUD, ROMAN refers to Hutcheon’s definition of adaptation and links it to the framework of precarity as developed by Judith Butler (2012) so as to analyse Gary Owen’s transfer of Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Aulis* into modern day Splott, a district in the

South of Cardiff in Wales. The mythological sacrifice of a woman against the socio-political ethos as impacted by the Trojan War becomes the very real sacrifice of a mother from the *lumpenproletariat* because of the 2010 cuts that destroyed the NHS. If a cry is once again at the heart of the play, Owen's *Iphigenia in Splott* (2015) raises issues of resilience and responsibility and nods back at the civic and ethical functions of theatrical adaptations delineated by ROMAN through Aragay and Middeke's concept of "Being-with" (2017).

The second part of this volume also tackles the idea of theatre as the expression of a community through rebooting plays or reiterating social events that question the making of the nation.

In her article on the 2019 Broadway revival of the musical *Oklahoma!* (1943), Anouk BOTTERO explores the idea that "nostalgia involves collective revisionism" (Knapp et al. 122) through visibility politics. She shows how director Daniel Fish integrated colored and disabled bodies in an otherwise white-centered narrative so as to interrogate the representation of nation-making. Focusing on scenography and choreography, she shows that while a performance is a means of integration that can redeem national myths and repair the musicals of the canon, iteration may show the limits of such a process.

In her article on Hannah Lavery's *Lament for Sheku Bayoh* (Lyceum Theatre & National Theatre Scotland 2020), Jeanne SCHAAF deals with how theatre can tackle the age-old issue of police violence against racialized citizens in the context of a mythical post-racial Scotland, and shows the extent to which iteration can work against trauma and towards change. The play focuses on the 2015 death by asphyxiation of Sheku Bayoh, who was on drugs and perceived as a threat to social order by police forces. Since the play is a verbatim choral piece for three performers and one singer, the "words of real people" are "creatively edited" (Garson 28). The elegy for Sheku Bayoh is performed through the verbal re-enactment of the scene, which is incrementally repeated onstage so as to enhance the deadening lack of closure in the procedure. The play itself is doubled up into a film due to COVID-19

and comes with a teacher's pack, leading to further discussion on racial discrimination in real life and on stage.

Dominic CHAMAYOU-DOUGLAS's contribution consists in an interview with Joe Douglas, who directed the reboot of John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*. First performed in 1973 with his 7:84 theatre company, the *ceilidh*, which tackles issues of land (dis)possession in Scotland over several centuries, was a commercial and critical success for being socially engaged, truly Scottish and definitely theatrical. Yet, when Joe Douglas revived the play at the Dundee Repertory Theatre in 2015, more than forty years after its first production, the play had to be updated so as to better fit the *zeitgeist* and political agenda. This was done through collaboration among actors and across productions, and involved rewriting the text to criticize the governments, letting the audience onto the stage so they feel represented, finding a new place for Gaelic, among many other devices.

The next section focuses on audience reception across time and space with plays that adapt the Shakespearean canon i.e. adapt it with variation or without repetition.

Méline DUMOT's article deals with two recent and radically different performances of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, one at Shakespeare's Globe (London, 2022) and the other at the Baltimore Shakespeare Factory (Baltimore, 2023). While the former is an adaptation that reconfigures the text through a feminist perspective that prioritizes female voices, the latter is a low-budget production that seems to be much closer to the original script. After presenting the performance history of the play, which is hardly ever staged nowadays because it suffers from a bad reputation, at least compared to other plays from the Shakespearean canon, the author uses audience data collected through surveys and interviews and draws on mixed methods research so as to analyse the audience's perception of "la fabrique de l'histoire" (Teulade) and how spectators choose and prepare for a Shakespeare play.

Marion COSTE also addresses the question of the adaptation of the Shakespearean canon in Monadhil Daoud Albayati's *Romeo and Juliet*

in Baghdad (2012), a play that focuses on the war on terror, and more specifically the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. To do so, she uses Linda Hutcheon's concept of "transculturation" (xvi) and wonders whether the play, meant for an Iraqi audience, can speak to a European audience, especially since it is presented in Arabic with English surtitles. Shakespeare's hypotext, "deployed as a tool of empire" (Sanders 52), becomes a space of conflict that leads not just to a decentering of the canon but to what Coste calls, after Deleuze, a rhizomatic conception of the canon that integrates subsequent adaptations.

The special issue on "Seriality, reboots and iterability on the Anglophone contemporary stage" ends with an interview by Marianne DRUGEON of stage director and playwright Koumarane VALAVANE, who also rewrote *Romeo and Juliet* in the context of the Indian caste system today. The interview was conducted in French as VALAVANE is from Pondicherry where French is one of the three official languages. The adaptation of Shakespeare's play he wrote and staged toured in India, France, Belgium and Tunisia and an English version of the text, which was originally written in Tamil and also exists in French, is included in this volume, accompanied by a short story centering on a terrible ritual which lies at the heart of the play. The play and the short story can thus be considered as part of the rhizomatic canon (Lanier 28-29) surrounding Shakespeare's famous tragedy, overlapping space and time, but also languages and literary genres.

All the articles in this volume explore how adaptation aims at bridging gaps between distant time periods, geographical spaces, cultural and linguistic differences, and participate in the creation of a community of audiences, united in their enjoyment of the reiteration of a well-known work of art. This is what Jill Dolan calls the "utopian performative":

Utopian performatives describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense. (Dolan 5)

Seriality, reboots and iterability enact this communal idea(l) in which performance and audience create a unique and joyful moment.

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¹ « Celui qui appartient véritablement à son temps, le vrai contemporain, est celui qui ne coïncide pas parfaitement avec lui ni n'adhère à ses prétentions, et se définit, en ce sens, comme inactuel ; mais précisément pour cette raison, précisément par cet écart et cet anachronisme, il est plus apte que les autres à percevoir et à saisir son temps. » (Agamben 19)