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Fringe Shakespeare: Shakespeare as You've Never Seen It Before

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The Edinburgh Festival Fringe has thousands of shows every year and dozens of Shakespeare productions among them. To stand out in the saturated festival market, Shakespeare productions emphasise their popular appeal, rebranding Shakespeare as a simultaneously familiar and, at the same time, new product. The neoliberal market conditions of the festival impose a series of limitations and, consequently, Shakespeare productions need to adjust to time and space restrictions and reduce their casts and sets. Shakespeare productions, therefore, negotiate these constraints in order to attract an audience, a tension that has given rise to specific theatrical approaches to Shakespeare in performance. The main objective of this article is therefore to provide an understanding of Fringe Shakespeare, that is, the theatrical events featuring Shakespeare in performance at the Edinburgh Fringe whose distinctive characteristics are determined by the festival context. To do so, the first part of the article reviews the concept of fringe theatre, examines the tension between innovation and material constraints and explores the reasons why so many companies decide to stage Shakespeare at the Edinburgh Fringe. The second part examines the performing trends in Fringe Shakespeare: appropriations, solo shows, new writing, adaptations into unusual genres and parodies. This will shed light on Fringe Shakespeare and its definition as a theatrical event in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

Keywords: theatre festival; Edinburgh Festival Fringe; popular culture; adaptation; parody; appropriation

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Fringe Shakespeare: Shakespeare como no lo habías visto nunca antes

El festival Fringe de Edimburgo acoge en cada edición miles de espectáculos, entre los que se suelen incluir varias docenas de obras de Shakespeare. Para destacar en la vorágine de espectáculos, los montajes de Shakespeare se presentan como un producto familiar a la par que novedoso. Las condiciones de libre mercado del festival imponen una serie de limitaciones que obligan a las compañías a ajustarse a restricciones de tiempo y espacio, además de reducir elencos y escenografías. Las obras de Shakespeare negocian con estas limitaciones para atraer al público, lo que ha dado lugar a ciertas tendencias recurrentes en la escena. Este artículo tiene como objeto explorar la representación de Shakespeare en el festival Fringe de Edimburgo a partir de las características propias que distinguen a este festival de otros contextos de representación y producción. Para ello, la primera parte revisa el concepto de teatro *fringe*, examina la tensión existente entre innovación y limitaciones materiales e indaga en las razones que llevan a multitud de artistas a representar las obras de Shakespeare en el festival. La segunda parte examina las corrientes existentes en la representación de Shakespeare en el Fringe: apropiaciones, espectáculos de un solo actor, textos de nueva creación, adaptaciones en géneros poco habituales y parodias. Esto sentará las bases para definir el término de Fringe Shakespeare, descrito como los acontecimientos teatrales donde aparece la obra de Shakespeare en el contexto del festival durante las primeras décadas del siglo XXI.

Palabras clave: festival de teatro; Festival Fringe de Edimburgo; cultura popular; adaptación; parodia; apropiación

10:00 *Shakespeare for Breakfast*. Theatre (Comedy, Family)
 11:30 *Shakin' Shakespeare*. Children's Shows (Comedy, Musical theatre)
 13:15 *Impromptu Shakespeare*. Theatre (Comedy, Improv)
 16:00 *Macbeth: Without Words*. Theatre (Multimedia, Physical theatre)
 22:15 *Shit-Faced Shakespeare*. Comedy (Classical, Tasting)
 Schedule of Shakespeare productions. 27 August, 2016, Edinburgh Fringe

I. INTRODUCTION

In August 2016, a festival-goer at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (henceforth Edinburgh Fringe) could easily transform their festival experience into a Shakespeare festival. They faced a choice of seventy Shakespeare productions among the maelstrom of 3,269 shows that the festival featured that year. Not even the Edinburgh International Festival (EIF), which overlaps in time and location with the Fringe, offers so many options of Shakespeare in performance within the same season, let alone on the same day. The schedule above is only one of the many viable options for a spectator eager to see as much Shakespeare as possible in a single festival day. This selection invites the spectator to start the day having breakfast with Shakespeare at ten in the morning and end it getting drunk, also with Shakespeare, at ten at night, after hours of intense festival activity. Turning one's Fringe experience into a self-curated Shakespeare festival allows for the comparison of a wide range of adaptations, as the schedule suggests, at the same time as giving one the opportunity to attend a larger number of Shakespeare productions than at specialised Shakespeare festivals like the one in Stratford Ontario (Canada) or any of the festivals of the European Shakespeare Festival Network, such as the Gdańsk Shakespeare Festival (Poland) or the Craiova International Shakespeare Festival (Romania).

The large number of Shakespeare productions at the Edinburgh Fringe is not, however, unique to the 2016 season, which coincided with the four-hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's death. The festival in fact generally includes these high numbers of Shakespeare productions because of one distinctive characteristic: it is an open festival where virtually any show can apply to appear in the programme without having to go through a selection process. In other words, the festival is a non-curated event.¹ To perform at the Edinburgh Fringe, companies need only meet two basic requirements: first, they must pay a fee to appear in the programme; second, they have to find a venue to stage their production, which usually implies hiring one. This open-access has led to the exponential growth of the festival, attracting thousands of artists who go to Edinburgh every summer in search of press reviews, finding a sponsor, or simply having several consecutive performances to gain experience.

¹ However, it should be noted that some festival venues do curate their Fringe artistic programme. Such is the case, for instance, with the Pleasance and the Summerhall, both well-known for their curated programmes.

At first sight, its open-access feature might portray the Edinburgh Fringe as an idyllic, democratic environment open to all sorts of artists. However, being invited to perform at curated festivals such as the EIF stands in sharp contrast to deciding to perform at the Fringe. While artists get paid to perform at the former, they have to cover the high expenses involved in performing at the latter (i.e., fee, venue hire, publicity, plus costs of accommodation, travel, etc). Ric Knowles (2004) suggests that festivals in general function primarily as marketplaces and uses the examples of the EIF and the Fringe to point out that, whereas the emphasis on the former is on “symbolic or cultural capital,” which is usually enough to attract an audience, the structure of the latter is “modelled directly on what is called free enterprise” (186), creating a scenario in which productions have to stand by themselves. Moreover, this market model entails companies having to make a large economic investment in the hope of later financial gain, simply breaking even or achieving some other type of compensation.

Within this neoliberal market and having to compete with thousands of other shows, Shakespeare productions need to stand out in a saturated festival market. To do so, most productions try to emphasise their popular appeal, rebranding Shakespeare in performance as simultaneously familiar and a new product. The neoliberal market conditions of the festival impose, however, a series of limitations in terms of production and performance. Shakespeare productions, as well as the other shows at the festival, must adjust to tight time restrictions (performing in slots of 60 to 90 minutes), space restrictions (with performances frequently staged in temporary spaces, not purpose-built theatres), making it a challenge for the project to remain economically viable which, due to the costs of performing at the festival, usually affects cast size (there is a tendency towards medium and small size companies). The negotiation of these constraints has resulted in Shakespeare productions at the Fringe taking certain specific theatrical performance approaches.

Although Shakespeare in performance at the Edinburgh Fringe has received little sustained academic attention,² Gerald M. Berkowitz regularly reviewed the festival productions for *Shakespeare Quarterly* in the 1980s and early 1990s; Jeremy Lopez (2004a; 2004b) examined the 2004 season; Stephen Purcell (2009; 2013) has incorporated Fringe productions in his analysis of Shakespeare in performance and popular culture; and I have studied elsewhere (Guerrero 2017) the specific case of *Romeo and Juliet* productions both at the Edinburgh Fringe and the Avignon Off (France)—both open-access festivals. In addition, these productions receive the attention of acclaimed theatre critics each year. Michael Billington and Lyn Gardner, for instance, regularly review Shakespeare productions at the Edinburgh Fringe.

The main objective in this article is, therefore, to provide an understanding of Fringe Shakespeare, that is, the theatrical events featuring Shakespeare in performance at the

² In contrast, the presence of Shakespeare in other festival contexts has received more critical attention in the last decade. See, for instance, March and Valls-Russell (2016); Guerrero (2020), Prescott (2021) and Cinpoe, March and Prescott (2021).

Edinburgh Fringe whose distinctive characteristics are determined by the context of the festival. To do so, the first section revises one of the most frequent misconceptions about fringe theatre, moves to examine the negotiation of Fringe Shakespeare between innovation and material constraints, and explores the reasons why so many companies decide to stage Shakespeare at this festival. The second part examines the performing trends in Fringe Shakespeare: appropriations, solo shows, new writing, adaptations into unusual genres and parodies.³

2. SHAKESPEARE AND THE OPEN-ACCESS SYSTEM

The origin of the Edinburgh Fringe as an alternative festival might lead to the misconception that most of the theatre productions at the festival, including Fringe Shakespeare, are risk-taking and avant-garde, what is commonly known as “fringe theatre.” Jonathan Law (2011), in *The Methuen Drama Dictionary of the Theatre*, defines fringe theatre as “innovative and radical theatre that takes place outside the commercial mainstream” (196). At its inception, the Fringe was certainly outside the commercial mainstream as it was created as a response to the EIF—which represents the commercial mainstream. The alternative festival advocated for a more inclusive event form from the outset. The Fringe emerged as a reaction to the elitism of the EIF (which initially programmed only well-established artists and had high ticket prices) as well as to the exclusion of Scottish theatre in the first season of the official festival in 1947 (Bartie 2014, 43). This led eight independent theatre companies to perform their shows in parallel to the first EIF.⁴ Many other artists joined the initiative in the following years, giving rise to the open-access festival currently managed by the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society, the organisation in charge of publishing the festival programme and offering support to the artists. The growth of the festival and its configuration as a neoliberal market have altered its original identity and, while it was once outside the mainstream, it is now an important part of the commercial theatre circuit in the UK and beyond. Due to its size and outreach, the Fringe can no longer be described in terms of its opposition to the EIF as it does not attempt to offer an alternative but constitutes a different type of cultural event.

The innovative and radical aspect of fringe theatre at the festival is also questionable. The risk of overgeneralising and describing theatre productions at the Edinburgh Fringe as innovative and radical is a real one: the concept of “fringe theatre” was born out of this festival, as companies in the first seasons “shared a commitment to offering

³ The term “adaptation” in this article follows the definition by Margaret Jane Kidnie who suggests that “although the work has no material reality in a text (or anywhere else), it functions in practice as though it did” (2009, 64). As such, productions defined as Shakespeare adaptations are those that maintain the Shakespearean source as a somewhat stable referent. In contrast, the concept of “appropriation” goes a step further, destabilising this reference and claiming its independence from its Shakespearean forebear.

⁴ Among those eight companies, the amateur local company The Christine Orr Players performed *Macbeth*, the first example of Shakespeare at the Fringe.

material that was distinctly alternative to what was on offer at the official Festival” (Harvie 2005, 79). In light of the current overgrown event of the Edinburgh Fringe, Knowles (2004) describes the free enterprise of the open-access model as based on the direct competition between shows, something that, he argues, leaves little space for alternative theatre “unless it is also sensational or has sufficiently broad popular appeal to draw crowds and attention” (186). Jen Harvie (2005) has also examined the Fringe and, in contrast to Knowles, she suggests that “while the Fringe’s free market conditions certainly militate against unbounded innovation, however, by no means do they eradicate it” (97), given that certain venues actively encourage experimental works and some even try to minimise the financial risk to the companies. Harvie’s ideas hint at an important aspect at the Fringe: encompassing such a wide range of productions under a single description is too risky, if not altogether impossible.⁵

It is therefore necessary to redefine the concept of “fringe theatre” in the context of the Edinburgh Fringe and, instead of describing it as a performance style associated with innovative and radical theatre, define it as the theatrical events that take place in the context of the festival.⁶ In the festival context, alternative does not necessarily stand as a synonym for outside the commercial mainstream, but rather as an unconventional mechanism of curation and a series of characteristics determined by the festival context. Likewise, the term “Fringe Shakespeare” does not refer to avant-garde Shakespearean performance, but to the Shakespearean theatrical events at this alternative festival. This does not mean that experimental productions do not feature at the Edinburgh Fringe. The festival has been particularly prolific in avant-garde productions. Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and Charles Marowitz’s *Macbeth* were first performed at the noncurated Fringe in 1966 and 1972 respectively. Nevertheless, as stated above, the current tendency is towards more popularised performance styles.

Fringe Shakespeare in the first decades of the twenty-first century responds to the characteristics and tensions of the open-access festival, and even the choice to stage one of Shakespeare’s plays can be interpreted as a direct consequence of its neoliberal market. With thousands of shows competing for attention, relying on Shakespeare’s reputation is a safe bet to ensure an audience. The festival programme offers very limited space to announce productions—just 40 words plus a picture—and artists strive to attract an audience by handing out flyers, putting up posters or performing fragments of their shows in the street. In this context, the label “Shakespeare” works as a marketing strategy: whereas the companies might be unknown to the vast majority of festival-goers, the author is certainly not, and attending a Shakespeare production might sound more attractive to many than going to a play by a less well-known author. Jeremy Lopez

⁵ Jen Harvie (2020) has also analysed the Edinburgh Fringe as a model neoliberal market in which competitiveness stands as one of the greatest risks that companies face when performing there.

⁶ The term “fringe theatre” is frequently used to describe theatrical events in permanent venues such as those of the London Fringe or the Off- and Off-Off Broadway, which share some features with the Edinburgh Fringe. However, given their different performance context, they require separate study.

(2004a) has also noted the efficiency of the Shakespeare brand at the Edinburgh Fringe, and he suggests that “the Bard’s name guarantees even the most obscure student theatre company a sizeable audience” (20). Shakespeare’s plays proliferate because festival-goers are familiar with the play or if not, at least, with the playwright.

To obtain “sufficiently broad popular appeal” (Knowles 2004, 186), Shakespeare productions at the Fringe often rebrand Shakespeare, the familiar label carrying associations of quality and high culture,⁷ as “Shakespeare as you’ve never seen it before.” In his guide for new artists to the Edinburgh Fringe, Mark Fisher (2012) explains that “it is very hard to stand out from the crowd with a production of an established play unless it has a star-name actor, an intriguing track record from abroad or an interpretation of shocking originality. You are more likely to attract attention with an original idea” (93). This idea of originality, not necessarily equivalent to radical or experimental theatre, is behind many of the Shakespeare productions at the Fringe, which attempt to present new takes on the plays.

As a consequence, there is a widespread tendency for productions to make claims about their shocking originality. For instance, *Impromptu Shakespeare*, one of the productions in the 2016 schedule, was described in the festival programme as “an improvised Shakespeare play inspired by audience suggestions. Bursting with comedy, love, tragedy, mistaken identity and everything in between, to delight Shakespeare nerds and newbies alike” (KSP Productions and Get Lost & Found 2016, 322). This short description emphasises the distinctive characteristic of the show as an improvised Shakespeare play based on audience interaction. Moreover, it illustrates how the company takes advantage of Shakespeare’s cultural capital and the popularity of the plays to market a product already familiar to the audiences, whether they are “Shakespeare nerds” or “newbies,” with a touch of novelty that ensures entertainment.

The characteristics of the festival generate a theatrical event in which “Shakespeare as you’ve never seen it before” is related not only to what makes the productions different from each other, but also, in a more indirect and less publicised sense, to the similarities between them. The Fringe homogenises certain aspects of the productions because of the material conditions they are subject to. A close analysis of the examples in the schedule for 2016, and those in the programmes of the different seasons in general, reveals how, despite their different approaches to the plays, most Shakespeare productions are small or medium-scale, and are typified by their short duration, reduced casts and space and technical restrictions.

The average length of productions at the Edinburgh Fringe is between one and one and a half hours. These reduced performance times are the result of the conditions that

⁷ Kate Rumbold (2011) has noted that even though the concept of the “Shakespeare brand” serves to describe the use of Shakespeare in popular culture, this idea is necessarily metaphorical. Its functioning cannot be equated with that of real trademarks such as Coca-Cola or Madonna, because Shakespeare does not refer to “a trade or proprietary name” (26). Likewise, the idea of Shakespeare as a brand at the Edinburgh Fringe is also metaphorical, although useful to describe the strategies of Shakespeare productions to attract attention.

most venues offer to the companies: the artists rent a space for a specific slot of time, hence performing for longer implies paying more. Some venues fine companies whose shows run over their allotted time and force them to comply with strict five-minute slots to put the set up and taking it down. While shortness is not exclusive to Shakespeare productions, it does affect the performance of Shakespeare's plays in distinct ways. Instead of the usual two- or three-hour long performance, the plays need to be adapted to a drastically reduced time frame to produce a consumable festival product. This means compressing the action and paring down the text more than is customary in contemporary performance or, as some companies do, writing a completely new playscript.

Most productions also involve a reduced number of actors, ranging from three to six. The 2016 *Shit-faced Shakespeare* was performed by six actors, the same number as *Impromptu Shakespeare*. *Macbeth: Without Words* had only three performers. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)*, one of the most successful examples of Fringe Shakespeare in the 1980s and brought back to the festival in 2014, also had a cast of only three actors. The limited casts imply actors doubling or tripling up on characters (sometimes even more), reducing the plays to the basic characters or reinventing them altogether. However, amateur productions seem to be the exception to reduced casts, and usually involve university or A-level groups from the UK and abroad. Companies directly dependent on educational institutions do not reduce casts as much as those with a more professional orientation, perhaps because, rather than pursuing economic or professional goals, their performance at the Edinburgh Fringe has an educational end.

The characteristics of the setting and the technological resources are also homogenised, with a tendency for simple technical designs and sets. This is partly due to the type of festival venues available. These fall into three main categories: permanent theatres, temporary structures and other spaces converted into theatres. Typically, a permanent theatre is better equipped than a temporary venue, but only a tiny proportion of the thousands of shows at the Fringe are located in permanent theatres. Most take place in *ad hoc* structures: *Shit-faced Shakespeare* (2016) was performed at the temporary performance space of the venue Underbelly in George Square; others are performed in spaces that are not usually associated with theatrical performance: *Shakin Shakespeare* (2016) took place within the National Museum of Scotland. Additionally, companies usually share the performance space, which leads to the simplification of technical resources. Productions are often forced to share the lighting design and to reduce the set, as the venues cannot provide storage for large sets for all the companies performing there and the limited time for set-in and set-out impedes the use of complicated set designs. Another problem is that of transport. Most companies travel to Edinburgh for the festival, which hinders the transport of large sets when the budget is limited. In contrast to Shakespeare productions at the EIF, with the means to store the sets and provide appropriate technical conditions for the productions, those at the Edinburgh Fringe tend to stage the plays on empty spaces or with very simple settings.

3. PERFORMING TRENDS IN FRINGE SHAKESPEARE

Fringe Shakespeare relies on taking distinctive approaches to the plays which place the productions in the realm of popular culture in the hope of achieving widespread appeal. Purcell (2009) has argued that Shakespearean theatre is “part of a spectrum of related and interconnecting cultural arenas, from stand-up comedy and sitcom to advertising, blockbuster films, and television sci-fi” (5). At the festival, Shakespeare productions are not only literally surrounded by other forms of popular entertainment—from a wide range of theatrical productions to stand-up comedy—but also integrate elements from popular culture in their performance. This is particularly useful for Fringe audiences because, as Lanier (2002) has pointed out, “popular audiences often engage Shakespeare through the lens of pop culture, because pop provides mass audiences widely shared models of plot construction, character, style, and ideology—in E. D. Hirsch’s term, a ‘cultured literacy’—for making sense of narrative, canonical and popular” (85). While festival audiences at the Fringe cannot be exactly defined as mass audiences (usually identified as the audiences of mass media, and not those attending theatrical performances), Shakespeare productions at the festival often resort to this “cultured literacy” of pop culture as a common referent for their audiences.

Two apparently opposite forces are observable in the examples of Fringe Shakespeare: on the one hand, most productions rely on similar strategies and pop references in their search for popular appeal; on the other, the productions try to offer their unique perspective on the plays while managing the material constraints. This latter element is so extensive that, even though the festival encompasses a wide range of theatrical creativity, it has resulted in recurrent interplay with popular culture as well as in performance styles that reappear across festival seasons. These styles, particularly prominent in the twenty-first century, are: appropriations of the plays by recontextualising the action, solo shows, new writing, adaptations into unusual genres and parodies. They are not mutually exclusive categories: solo shows are often based on new writing and adaptations into unusual genres are sometimes parodic. These categories are not therefore intended to be self-contained, but, rather, they help to describe the trends of Shakespeare in performance at the Edinburgh Fringe by emphasising the most prevalent characteristics of the shows analysed in this article. Additionally, although these categories do not account for all the Shakespeare productions at the Fringe, they represent the major approaches to Shakespeare in performance.

The appropriation of the plays, contextualising the action in a different setting from that suggested by the plays themselves, is one of the most widespread strategies employed by Shakespeare productions. Some of the most bizarre appropriations at the Edinburgh Fringe in recent seasons include a *Romeo and Juliet* for children with the characters turned into sheep (*Romeo and Eweliet*, Unknown Theatre/Ripley Theatre 2003), and an adaptation of *Macbeth* in Botswana, also starring animal characters, this time baboons fighting for power (*The Okavango Macbeth*, Edinburgh Studio Opera 2013). In this fashion, the plays are turned into Disney-like productions with animal protagonists in order to offer a new perspective, performing the popular plays in a new genre.

Setting zoological adaptations aside, one of the favourite temporal locations of Shakespeare productions at the Fringe is the present, as has been the case with the numerous *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations in recent seasons (Guerrero 2017). In these productions, elements from popular culture are key to placing the action in our times. The Hand Stitched Theatre Company, for instance, staged a production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Fringe in 2011 and 2012 where an all-teen cast performed the play in t-shirts and sneakers, with techno music for the ball scene, recalling Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996), still a reference to contextualising the play in the present. In 2014, the Beaconsfield Players, a company of actors in their early twenties, adapted the story of the star-crossed lovers to modern times with Romeo being played as a woman by a female actor and portrayed as a woman. Contrary to what might have been expected, the play did not problematise the love relationship between two women, but the shift in gender was used simply as a reflection of the legalisation of gay marriage in the UK in 2013. The families' confrontation was eliminated, and, instead, drugs were the central problem in the production, as Romeo and Juliet—as well as Mercutio—die of overdoses.

These *Romeo and Juliet* productions exemplify Fringe Shakespeare's search to depict a reality closer to that of the spectators through blending influences from different sources—from other adaptations of Shakespeare's play (Luhrmann's film) to social issues such as drug taking and same-sex relationships. While some productions, such as that of the Hand Stitched Theatre Company, update the play by relying on the introduction of contemporary music and costumes, others, such as the Beaconsfield Players, attempt to make the plot relevant in a present-day context. Part of the strategy of "Shakespeare as you've never seen it before" in these productions is to make the play more accessible and meaningful to festival-goers by connecting, or even transforming, the aesthetics and problems in the plays to the twenty-first century.

A more direct response to the material constraints of the festival are solo shows. Such shows are particularly suitable for open-access festivals like the Fringe because, first, they cut the costs of larger casts and, second, they typically employ minimal or no sets and no stage effects, concentrating instead on a virtuoso acting style. Their reduced scale also facilitates their performance in small venues. This is not only artistically beneficial for the productions (keeping actor and audience in close proximity encourages spectators to concentrate on the performer and favours the stage-auditorium interaction common in this type of production), but also economically, as hiring a slot in a small venue tends to be cheaper than performing in a large one and, even though small performance spaces means reduced audience numbers, this contributes to balancing the financial risk.

Abridged versions of *Hamlet* with one actor performing all (or several) roles in the play are frequent among Shakespeare solo shows. Productions such as *A One Man Hamlet* (Living Art, Edinburgh Fringe 2012) and *Hamlet, la fin d'une enfance* [Hamlet, the End of a Childhood] (Edinburgh Fringe 2010) represent two different approaches to *Hamlet*'s performance by a single actor. In *A One Man Hamlet*, which reveals the mechanics of the

production in its very title, the actor combined Hamlet's monologues and soliloquies with some interventions by other main characters (Ophelia, Gertrude and Claudius), shifting from character to character with the aid of a few props and music. To perform Ophelia, for instance, the actor used a handkerchief while a classical-music melody played in the background. This production drew the attention of the spectator to the acting itself—the role traditionally being considered a challenge requiring exceptional acting skills, here being made harder still by the actors' need to play various characters.

Though equally concerned with acting, *Hamlet, la fin d'une enfance* employed a different strategy. The play was framed by the story of a young boy, performed by an adult actor, whose mother has just divorced and wants to introduce him to her new partner. Evoking the attitude of Shakespeare's character towards Claudius, the boy rejects his mother's invitation to meet the man that he sees as a usurper, and decides to stay in his room, where he starts playing and recreating *Hamlet*. The boy himself plays the role of the Prince of Denmark and uses several objects in the room for the other characters. The object for each character has a special significance: Gertrude, Claudius and Polonius resemble each other, with the first two represented by pillows and the latter by a cushion; Ophelia is a delicate fan and Laertes a boxing glove, symbolising vengeance. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the action figures of Aragorn and Legolas from the *Lord of the Ring* films—an ironic choice given that Aragorn and Legolas are instructed by Gandalf to protect Frodo, but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern attempt to kill Hamlet on Claudius's orders. Hamlet's faithful friend, Horatio, finds his equivalent in the boy's most precious toy, his teddy bear.

Reviews of the performance at the Edinburgh Fringe highlighted the acting style of the actor, who, in spite of the linguistic barrier (the production was performed in French with English subtitles), was nominated for the Stage Awards in the category of "Acting excellence for the best solo performer." Festivals often lead to the decontextualization of the productions, as there is an obvious distance between the contexts of production and reception (McConachie 2010, 486). This is even more evident in productions in foreign languages, as is the case of *Hamlet, la fin d'une enfance* at the Edinburgh Fringe. However, the choice to stage Shakespeare's plays in languages other than English (Kennedy 2009, 128) and the strong focus on acting of solo shows is particularly productive in avoiding such decontextualization, providing both a common reference for the audiences (Shakespeare's plays) and a theatrical experience beyond direct linguistic understanding.

Other productions shift their attention to new scripts, as in new writing productions. Mark Fisher (2012) has described the Edinburgh Fringe as "a celebration of the new" (66), a celebration that is encouraged by initiatives such as the Scotsman Fringe First Awards, traditionally granted to new writing plays. The most popular example of new writing related to a Shakespeare's play at the Fringe was Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in 1966, which went on to achieve great success thereafter. The search for originality has given rise to different strategies in new writing, with new

scripts making a connection to either the plays, as in Stoppard's case, or Shakespeare himself. As an example of the latter, *Wild Bill: Sonnet of a Bardsterd* (Michael Longhi, Edinburgh Fringe 2015) gave Shakespeare the chance to defend himself against charges of being an empty idol or the impostor imagined by the Oxfordian theory. Other recent examples of new writing focus on a single character and cast only one actor. This was the case, for instance, of Tim Crouch's *I, Malvolio* (2011) and *Lady M* (Het Vijfde Bedrijf—The Fifth Act, 2012). These productions offered their audiences an insight into the stories that Shakespeare did not tell about *Twelfth Night* and *Macbeth* from the perspective of Malvolio and Lady Macbeth's maid respectively.

In the competition to give rise to "an interpretation of shocking originality" (Fisher 2012, 93), Shakespeare's plays have also been performed in unusual genres, that is, theatrical styles that are not usually associated with Shakespearean drama. This has given rise to an interplay between Shakespeare's plays and theatrical styles directly associated with popular culture, such as musicals, cabaret, circus or storytelling. Shakespeare musicals are frequent in the festival programme. In 2013, the production *A Glee Inspired: Romeo and Juliet* (Denver School of the Arts Theatre, 2013) featured a musical show that mixed Shakespeare's play and the TV series *Glee*, imitating the musical moments of the series with songs commenting on the action. Other examples include *Hamlet! The Musical* (Wellington College, 2011) and the productions by Captivate Theatre: *Brave Macbeth* (2013, 2014 and 2015) and *Romantic Romeo* (2014 and 2015). In 2015, London Shakespeare's Globe made its debut at the Edinburgh Fringe with two storytelling productions based on *Romeo and Juliet* and *Titus Andronicus*. The productions included just a storyteller who retold Shakespeare's plays in order to make them accessible for children. These theatrical styles thus serve for productions to address the variety of interests of the wide age-range of festival audiences at the Edinburgh Fringe.

The interplay between pop conventions and Shakespeare comes to the fore in one of the most popular performance styles at the festival: parodies. The abundance of parodies at the Fringe can be related to its performance conditions. The venues' compressed timetables, for instance, are more suitable for fast-paced comedy and, by extension, parody, than for tragedy and, as a result, many of Shakespeare's tragedies are often performed with a comic twist. Another possible reason is that many festival-goers travel to Edinburgh to attend stand-up shows—actually, the comedy section of the Edinburgh Fringe accounts for vastly more shows than the theatre section—and, therefore, staging a parody might attract a wider audience. The festive ambience of the Edinburgh streets during the festival—packed with performers, flyers, free shows and all kinds of entertainment—seems to be the perfect backdrop for Shakespearean parody. This explains why, in its seventy-three years of existence,⁸ three Shakespearean parodies have become staples of the festival: *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)*,

⁸ The Edinburgh Fringe has been held uninterruptedly since its first season in 1946 with the sole exception of 2020, due to the COVID-19 crisis.

performed for the first time at the festival in 1987, *Shakespeare for Breakfast*, a parody which changes each year but has been performed since 1991, and *Shit-faced Shakespeare*, a production that has staged a different Shakespeare play each festival since 2012.

The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged), a production by the Reduced Shakespeare Company, blends parody and short duration, making it a good fit for the Fringe. The production falls into the category that Peter Holland (2007) has labelled “abbreviated Shakespeare,” a tradition that he traces back to the seventeenth century and that Fringe Shakespeare appropriates for burlesque purposes (26). The production, as Lanier (2002) has pointed out, makes “comedy of how much of the original text can be cut while still conveying its ‘spirit’” (99). It has its origins in sketches of Shakespeare’s plays performed at Renaissance fairs in the United States in the 1980s. In 1987, the Reduced Shakespeare Company—note the coincidence of the acronym of the company with that of the Royal Shakespeare Company—devised *The Complete Works* to perform at the Edinburgh Fringe. After its success in Edinburgh, the production toured extensively, and was performed in the West End in the 1990s.⁹ The production claims to encompass Shakespeare’s thirty seven plays performed by three actors in only one and a half hours,¹⁰ standing as a paramount example of how a Shakespeare production adapts to the constraints of the festival in terms of cast and duration. Even though not all the plays are performed, all are mentioned at least once, and some are staged in extremely reduced versions, as in the case of *Hamlet*, which is performed in a one-minute, a three-second and a thirty-second-backwards versions.

Shakespeare for Breakfast has been serving breakfast and early morning Shakespearean parodies for almost thirty years. The performance is accompanied by a complimentary cup of coffee or tea and a croissant, to lure early risers—10.00 a.m. is considered early morning by Edinburgh Fringe standards. The parody is different every year and often resorts to the formula of mixing one of Shakespeare’s plays and a recognisable element from popular culture. In 2011, for instance, the opening scene in *King Lear* was staged as the TV show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* In 2014, *Macbeth* was turned into an American high school movie, with Macbeth trying to occupy the position of the captain on the football team and Lady Macbeth portrayed as a cheerleader. The parody found its basis in the transposition of Macbeth’s desire for power from king to football captain, shrinking the plot from the stakes of a kingdom to a high school team.

The 2014 production was more complex as, instead of parodying a specific play, it mixed plots, lines and characters from different ones. The action was set on a desert island and the plot was concerned with a plan to overthrow Shakespeare by a group of

⁹ Its popularity has led the company to sell the script and the rights to perform it. As a result, the show has been performed twice at the Edinburgh Fringe by other companies in the first decades of the twenty-first century: The American High School Festival (2008) and Black and White Rainbow (2009). In 2014, the Reduced Shakespeare Company returned to the Edinburgh Fringe to perform *The Complete Works* once more. The production has also travelled abroad, it has been translated into several languages, including Spanish, and has been performed at other Shakespeare festivals.

¹⁰ Lanier (2002), Holland (2007) and Purcell (2009) have also commented on this production.

villains (Iago, Tamora, Richard III and the Third Witch from *Macbeth*), while the heroes (Hamlet, Katherine, Henry V, Ariel and Steve—a young man that had arrived on the island after a shipwreck, echoing the fate of the characters from *The Tempest*) attempted to stop them. The production encouraged active comparison with its Shakespearean forebears; however, this did not mean that spectators unfamiliar with the sources were completely excluded. The new script was a sufficiently independent entity that it could be enjoyed without understanding the totality of its references, ensuring entertainment for a wide range of festival-goers: from those that expected to see a Shakespearean parody to those that were there just for the croissants.

Shit-faced Shakespeare (Magnificent Bastard Productions) goes even further in the performance of Shakespeare in an inappropriate style. Since its Fringe premiere in 2012, the show presents a different Shakespeare play every year in which one of the actors is completely drunk.¹¹ The drunk actor, who changes every night for health reasons, is said to have started drinking well before the show. Some visual evidence of this is displayed before the audience at the opening, with the introduction of the drunken actor accompanied by a collection of empty bottles consumed in the pre-drinking leading to the performance. During the show, the actor is made to drink again on, at least, three occasions.

Shit-faced Shakespeare productions have been a complete success at the festival, with sold-out performances every year and productions replicating its model beyond the Fringe.¹² The performance of the drunken actor oscillates between playing the drunk and being actually inebriated, introducing improvisation throughout the show. The drunken actor often relies on stereotypes of drunken behaviour: saying inappropriate things, telling the truth (the declaration of not understanding Shakespeare being among the most recurrent confessions), stumbling, forgetting their lines or doing some other kind of mischief. In one of the performances of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2012), a drunk Demetrius constantly declared his love to his fellow actors and even interrupted the action to address the audience and tell them how good the rest of the cast were.

Along with re-imagining Shakespearean performance as a drinking game, the production also vindicates a more popular Shakespeare closer to Elizabethan times than more canonical representations of the plays, not because it features a drunken actor on stage, but because it encourages the audience's active interaction. Two spectators, provided with a gong and a horn, are responsible for deciding when the actor should drink again. The rest of the audience, sometimes more inebriated than the actor

¹¹ The production was listed under the name *Sb*t-faced Shakespeare* in the 2012 and 2014 programmes of the Edinburgh Fringe. Until 2019, *Shit-faced Shakespeare* productions have been based on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2012), *Much Ado About Nothing* (2013), *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (2014), *The Merchant of Venice* (2015), *Measure for Measure* (2016), *Romeo and Juliet* (2017), *Hamlet* (2018) and *Macbeth* (2019).

¹² The Off-Broadway production *Drunk Shakespeare* also includes a drunk actor in their performance of *Macbeth*. *Drunk Shakespeare* premiered in the US in 2014, two years after *Shit-faced Shakespeare* started at the Edinburgh Fringe. See Holl (2018).

on stage, cheer and boo to encourage them to use the instruments. This active and noisy interaction has led reviewers to compare the production with an original, long-forgotten Shakespeare. Yasmin Sulaiman (2012) wrote for *The List*: “It won’t win any plaudits from the health authorities, but it’s a gut-busting hour that rediscovers the original raucous spirit of Shakespeare.” In this raucous spirit, the audience not only celebrates the failures of the drunken actors, but also their success.¹³ As another review points out, one of the highlights of the performance of the drunk Demetrius in 2012 was precisely when the actor tried to deliver his lines appropriately: “He was at his funniest, however, when he stopped goofing around and tried to deliver his lines properly, inadvertently mangling some of the Bard’s best writing while maintaining a look of steely concentration” (Cox 2012). Nevertheless, this instance of what the reviewer considers almost proper Shakespearean performance was interrupted by the spectator with the gong, compelling the actor to drink again. The show has taken advantage of its unusual characteristics to advertise itself as a late-night entertainment in the festival’s comedy section instead of the theatre section, thus addressing audiences beyond those only interested in theatre and simultaneously warning its spectators that this is not the type of Shakespearean parody that they might be used to.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Fringe Shakespeare productions are predicated on the desire to present “Shakespeare as you’ve never seen it before,” no matter whether they are *Romeo and Juliet* appropriations, solo *Hamlet* productions, new plays with Shakespeare as a character, musical versions or parodies with a drunken actor. Although the most widespread performance styles belong to the five categories analysed in this article, each production has its own take on the play, opening up a new perspective in Shakespeare in performance that claims theatrical creativity and, simultaneously, strives to adapt to the material constraints of the Edinburgh Fringe. In their search for popular appeal, these productions are frequently addressed to both those familiar with the plays and those who only know the name of the playwright, something that enhances their suitability to address the wide target audience of the festival. Shakespeare’s name works, then, together with other marketing strategies, such as serving complimentary breakfast or advertising the production in the comedy section. Far from the radical and innovative approaches that the idea of Fringe Shakespeare might suggest to those unfamiliar with the Edinburgh Fringe, it is subjected to the constant negotiation between innovation and material constraints, with productions often relying on popular culture to survive in an overcrowded festival market.

Moreover, the appeal of Fringe Shakespeare at the Edinburgh Fringe goes beyond the individual shows in the programme. Part of the “Shakespeare as you’ve never seen

¹³ For Marina Cano (2019), this noisy show and its recreation of what the actual ambience in an Elizabethan public theatre might have been given “credibility to the idea that Shakespeare is a timeless genius who needs to be recuperated, rather than one that has been ritualistically constructed over the centuries” (258).

it before” experience has to do with this context of reception: with a virtually all-encompassing programme, the number of Shakespeare productions in any given season at the Edinburgh Fringe is such that anyone can turn their festival experience into a unique Fringe Shakespeare festival.¹⁴

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