







**Skenè Studies II • 11**

*Annadora Zuanel*

**“What’s past is prologue”:  
the Verona Shakespeare Fringe,  
Five Years and Counting**



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## S K E N È Texts and Studies - Studies II

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# Contents

|                                                                                |     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| JOHN BLONDELL                                                                  |     |
| Foreword                                                                       | 7   |
| SHAKESPEARE(S) THEN AND NOW: AN OVERVIEW                                       | 13  |
| THE VERONA SHAKESPEARE FRINGE                                                  | 33  |
| 1. Cultural and Linguistic Diversity                                           | 41  |
| 2. Innovation and Multimodality                                                | 54  |
| 3. Adaptation and Accessibility                                                | 67  |
| 4. Audience Participation                                                      | 80  |
| 5. Shared Experience                                                           | 88  |
| INTERVIEWS WITH THE COMPANIES                                                  | 103 |
| 1. “Like a true meeting of worlds”:<br>Interview with Bi-qi Beatrice Lei       | 105 |
| 2. ‘Activating’ Shakespeare:<br>Interview with Fred Abrahamse and Marcel Meyer | 111 |
| WHAT NEXT                                                                      | 117 |
| SILVIA BIGLIAZZI AND SIDIA FIORATO                                             |     |
| Afterword                                                                      | 123 |
| WORKS CITED                                                                    | 131 |
| INDEX                                                                          | 137 |



JOHN BLONDELL

*Foreword*





It was February, 2021 – early in the first full Covid Winter. I was in North Macedonia, spending a strange sabbatical. Professionally, I had no theatre projects. Personally? Let's just say my personal life was stuck on "Pause". I needed an outlet, to *do* something, to *go* somewhere. With various travel bans in place, at that time a US citizen could travel to two destinations – Jamaica and North Macedonia. Jamaica would have been nice, but I don't know anyone in Jamaica. But North Macedonia? I could go there! I had directed projects in Bitola for over a decade, and had friends with whom I could live and hang, at a distance of course. I was in my friend Blagoj's tastefully appointed flat, smack dab in the Bitola Center. I was scouring email and having a coffee (maybe) or a late afternoon Rakija (more probably) when an email popped in. A young woman introduced herself as an MA student in Shakespeare Studies at Verona University, where she was writing a thesis on Global Shakespeare. She explained that she was Albanian and her thesis centered on recent Shakespearean productions in Albania. She'd seen I had directed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the Teatri Kombetar (National Theatre) in 2013, and wondered if she could interview me. Of course she could!

Within a few days, Danjela Kasa and I met on Zoom. At conversation's end, she wondered if I would like to meet her professors! Of course I would! Within days (on the afternoon of February 17, to be exact) I found myself online with some members of the faculty of Foreign Languages and Literature at Verona University, most of whom contribute to the Skenè Centre that focuses on the relation between ancient and early modern English theatre. As I remember it (and of course memory can be as faulty as it is imaginative), there were five or so online, including Skenè Centre Director Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Professors Sidia Fiorato and Emanuel Stelzer, among others. In the midst of our lively, free-wheeling conversation, Silvia mentioned that she wanted to start a Shakespeare festival. I immediately yelped, "I'll help, I'll help!" We continued to talk about the exciting prospect of a Shakespeare fringe festival in Verona. We chatted on and on, and by the end of the meeting we had founded the Verona Shakespeare Fringe Festival. I thought of Constantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, who met at Moscow's Slavic Bazaar at 2 pm on June 22, 1887, and by the end of their meeting 18 hours later had founded the Moscow Art Theatre. Would February 17, 2021, sometime in the late afternoon/early evening be as earth shaking? I had no idea, but I did feel a palpable sense of something new stirring, some new possibility – Hope in that Covid Winter.

It's been six years already, and the Verona festival has been a never-ending source of excitement, intrigue, and theatrical adventure. There are no harder working theatre professionals *in the world* as Silvia, Sidia, and Emanuel, et al, and their scholarship, projects, and research hold an esteemed place in Shakespeare Studies. They approach Shakespeare from a Mediterranean perspective, a font of

inspiration for this American-Anglo Director of Shakespeare. From the beginning, we created VSF to bridge the perceived gap between the professional theatre and the academy, and build a festival that favors experimentation, originality, and freshness. We sought new voices, forms, and ideas. We wanted to inspire conversation, and the free exchange of ideas and perspectives. We wanted to present shows with unique origins or points of view. Though there are dozens of highlights over the years, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from Kyiv's National Academic Molodyy Theatre in 2022 stands out. The war was only a few months old, but the Molodyy got permissions, visas, and trains, and arrived in Verona three days after they left Kyiv. The show was wild, physical, and ecstatically funny, and we were rapt by what we saw before us. When the lights faded, the entire room leapt to its feet in immediate, instantaneous, thunderous applause. The theatre can be many things, and used for many purposes. That night, the Molodyy *Dream* and team were *heroic*, and I was proud to be in the theatre that evening to witness it.

When I direct, I focus on turning points, moments where the play's action turns abruptly to a new direction. They are the lifeblood of drama. I think it's why we go to the theatre. We watch characters deal with *change*, with the feelings that emerge, the energies unleashed, and the mental processes elicited in the dramatic turns of the play. That February evening in Bitola/Verona is one such turning point for me. It commenced a new chapter of creative work, with new a band and soulmates. In that early evening, while the rest of the world lay at distance and disconnected, I immediately felt *more connected*, refreshed with new motivation, purpose, and resolve. I am immensely grateful to my Veronese colleagues, who have contributed so much and so deeply to my life. They

are The Best. I am happy to be here, and thrilled to collaborate with them on the wild and wonderful Verona Shakespeare Fringe. *Viva Verona!*

John Blondell  
VSF Co-founder and Artistic Director

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