

**The First Ones Back:
Actor Testimony and the ‘Show Must Go On’ ethos at the Stratford Festival of Canada in
2021**

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Abstract:

This thesis looks at Shakespearean performance at the Stratford Festival of Canada during its 2021 outdoor ‘pandemic’ season. It argues that the dominant pre-pandemic ‘show must go on’ ethos, that puts institutional well-being ahead of actor well-being, persisted during the pandemic season, even as the Festival implemented painstaking anti-racist and anti-oppressive initiatives. Alongside this argument, the thesis interrogates the ethics around the use of actor testimony in scholarship and attempts to ethically expand its focus from pure Shakespearean performance to include actor statements on institutional practices and policy. Extensive interviews with the 2021 casts of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *R+J* are, to this end, at the heart of the study. The paper follows Bridget Escolme’s instruction to use actor testimony dialogically and places these interviews in conversation with contemporary Shakespearean performance theory around labour, disability, diversity, pandemic Shakespeare, the nature of the ‘Shakespearean actor’ in Western culture, and, most importantly, with actor testimony from other sources and the auto-ethnography of the author, a Stratford actor himself. Concentrating on testimony around Zoom, masking, and social distancing during the rehearsal process, the thesis reveals the emotional, physical and financial difficulties the actors took on in order for the show to go on at the Stratford Festival during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Introduction

What's your Process/How were you Processed?

‘The story any production tells is not just the story of the play, it's also the story of those actors as they rehearsed it’ – Paola Dionisotti (Rutter xvii)

The Stratford Festival of Canada’s announcement of an all-outdoor ‘pandemic’ season came on April 6th, 2021, the day before the Ontario government upgraded its April 1st provincewide shutdown to a full state of emergency with a stay-at-home order (DeClerq “Stay-at-home”). Given the timing, the announcement seemed like pure wishful thinking. With Covid variants proliferating, case counts spiking, a state of emergency, *and* a stay-at-home order in effect, it was difficult to imagine gathering at all in 2021, let alone for a full theatre season starting June 22nd. But the announcement was optimistic and forward-looking. Artistic Director Antoni Cimolino said:

This dream of transformation from our isolated lives informed my choice of theme for the 2021 season: Metamorphosis. The productions will embody our hope for a transition from lockdown to a new beginning, imbued with much needed social and political change. They examine souls kept apart by social convention, family feuds or racism. Souls that yearn for community, understanding and the union of love. Souls that emerge transformed from their trials into a brave new world of freedom. (Stratford “Media Release 06/21”)

Later, quoted in the *Toronto Star*, he said “We are hopeful that the current Ontario lockdown and the vaccination program will enable a successful outdoor summer season...As butterflies shedding their cocoons, we are poised to emerge from this pandemic” (Canadian Press). As an

once and future Stratford Festival actor, I wondered what the Festival's planned pandemic "metamorphosis" would be like for the actors, especially those cast in their proposed Shakespearean productions, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *R+J*, which would lend themselves to comparisons with pre-pandemic Shakespearean rehearsals. What labour beyond the "normally complex work" (Julian 99) of Shakespearean rehearsal and performance would be required? How would masking and social distancing affect the intense vocal and physical demands of rehearsing Shakespeare? What would it be like doing a Stratford Festival season in self-contained cast operating within what public health messaging described as a 'bubble,' instead of cross-cast in several shows as is typical in a Stratford repertory season? How would pandemic Stratford compare to pre-pandemic Stratford as an employer? How would the pandemic have changed actors returning to work after seeing their profession vanish for a year? Was a caterpillar-to-cocoon-to-butterfly metamorphosis possible for an institution as entrenched in its tradition and heritage as Stratford? What kind of 'process' could happen for the actors with such an array of new institutional processes occurring around them and shaping their experience? As the multi-directional 'front line' workers of the Festival – facing each other, the paying public, creative teams, stage management, backstage workers, and the Festival staff and administration – they would be tasked with doing athletic breath-based Shakespearean work during an airborne pandemic, while simultaneously embodying the Festival's accelerated attempts at culture change and adhering to strict Covid policies. It was, to say the least, a tall order for any actor.

When the season did, surprisingly, go into rehearsals more or less on schedule in the late spring of 2021, it seemed that the best way to understand the actors' experience of this singular moment in the Festival's history would be to ask them about it. Following Bridget Escolme's

“exhortation” to “Make dialogic archives” of practitioners speaking to other practitioners (Escolme 89), I interviewed the fifteen adult cast members of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *R+J* to create an ethnographic portrait of rehearsing and performing in the Festival’s 2021 pandemic season. Then, in an extended experiment dialogic archiving, this exegesis places these actors’ testimony in conversation with criticism, scholarship, autoethnography, and actor testimony from other sources around topics including masking, social distancing, and labour. Overall, this testimony captures a significant moment of tension around labour practices at Stratford: even though pandemic-related shifts in policy and practice were positive steps toward the Festival’s becoming more artist-friendly, the ‘show must go on’ ethos still informed these changes, with the actors bearing the physical and emotional labour and risk, just as they did before the pandemic.

As a working Stratford actor, I was particularly motivated in the creation of this archive to contribute to the de-glamorization of the ‘Shakespearean actor’ and to reinforce the view of Shakespearean performance as labour (Borsuk et al 1). Anna Blackwell rightly observes that “the Shakespearean [actor] is frequently coded as a representative of ‘high’ cultural values” (79) and associated with the economic and cultural elite, intellectualism, and grandiloquence (78). While rank-and-file ‘company members’ of institutions like the Stratford Festival can certainly be grandiloquent and intellectual, their lived experience is often very different from the popular perception of Shakespeareans. As I write this, I am in my second month of a contract at the Stratford Festival. I am sitting at an Ikea dining room table, in the second-floor apartment of an extremely run-down house on the main thoroughfare. The Festival does not subsidize out-of-town actors’ housing and, due to an extreme spike in the cost of housing in Stratford, I am living with a roommate to save money. But I am also playing a lead role in the season. I am featured

prominently (and heavily airbrushed) in the Festival's Visitor's Guide, their website, publicity, and press, such as a Globe and Mail article that lists the show I'm starring in as one of the Festival's 2023 "Must Sees" (Nestruck "What to See"). My work and image reinforce the view of the Festival as polished and elite. In reality, my landlord won't fix the water dripping into my bedroom when it rains because they plan to tear the building down to put up condos. I do not write out of self-pity or, as Peter Holland says, to make it "all about me" (27). This season has already been hugely rewarding creatively, reconnected me to a beloved community of peers, and given me an eight-month window of relative financial stability in a turbulent time. I use myself as an introductory example of how the 'show going on' at institutions like Stratford, with their public image of glamour, big budgets, and high culture, frequently depends on actors enduring more than a challenging creative process in exchange for membership in the company.

2021 marked the beginning of an institutional sea-change at the Stratford Festival. "The neon sign erected by the pandemic reads "Change or perish"....The arts sector was devastated by the pandemic, and we are facing a moment of reckoning where we need to examine the ways that we organize our systems of cultural production" (Litzenberger). As the Festival responded to this high-stakes call to change or perish – as well as a hefty financial setback – I felt especially compelled to record how these changes affected the group least heard from in Shakespearean actor testimony: rank-and-file company members. But because change has been so rapid between 2021 and today, the circumstances and policies described in these interviews have already changed and evolved. This is not an attempt to use actor testimony to carve out a lasting picture of the Stratford Festival as an institution, nor is it an attempt to reach any fixed ideas about the experience of acting at the Stratford Festival. Now, more than ever perhaps, the Festival and the experience of actors working there is in flux. And just as the Covid pandemic reminded us that

we are “all in the same storm, but not in the same boat” (Žižek 31), no two actors experienced Stratford, or the pandemic, in the same way. These actors’ testimony captures the plurality of perspectives within an acting company and, hopefully, highlights the importance of both scholars and theatre institutions using actor testimony to understand how much an artist’s lived experience of an institution shapes their work as much as their individual ‘process’. At the same time, I hope to show how these varied testimonies, used ethically, can be an effective indicator of how much an institution is living up to its own purported artistic and ethical goals.

‘The Stratford Swivel’: Some Considerations of Actor Testimony and Institutional Theatres

From the “first of its kind” (Brockbank 1) *Players of Shakespeare* series published in 1985 to the present, the bulk of Shakespearean actor testimony, regardless of its format, is dedicated to Shakespearean actors discussing their process in crafting a performance of a particular role. When scholars use the testimony of these actors in a scholarly discourse outside the actors’ intention of communicating their process, there are “delicate ethical obligations” (Escolme 78) for the scholar to consider given that the actor is “part of an industry, the uncertainty and sensitivities of which might lead him or her to read intended scholarly neutrality as a Bad Review” (78). This exhortation for ethical care with actor testimony is even more important when scholars use the testimony of the largest population of Shakespearean actors: the less than famous ones who may be materially harmed if their testimony is unflattering to an institution like Stratford or to someone in the industry who might hold a grudge. This ethical care is especially important when the actors are asked to speak beyond their process and discuss how the institutions that employed them affected them; or, put another way, how they were *processed* by the institution during the creation process. Such discussions are not unheard of in the

testimony of renowned Shakespearean actors higher in the institutional or show business pecking order, such as Scott Wentworth speaking about the downsides of the repertory system at Stratford (Liston 151) or Harriet Walter on the difference in stakes for female directors vs. male directors at the Royal Shakespeare Company (Rutter xx). But it is a subject rank-and-file actors are understandably wary of discussing. Indeed, among Stratford actors, there is a running joke that before you say anything critical of the Festival it's a good idea to do the 'Stratford swivel': a look over both shoulders to make sure the wrong person isn't overhearing you. Slightly chilling echoes of a police-state aside, the joke points directly at the career damage that could come to actors heard or quoted saying something negative about the Festival. In Canada, this caution about 'biting the hand that feeds you' is especially understandable in the case of the Stratford Festival actors. Employment statistics for Canadian theatre actors are grim: according to Canadian Actors Equity, "members working in theatre overwhelmingly reported [annual] earnings of less than \$20,000 (89%)" (CAEA "2015 Census" 39). The 2016 census from ACTRA, the actors' film and television union, paints a similarly bleak picture, with average total earnings for Ontario members sitting at \$15,023.34 (ACTRA "Census" 17). The Stratford Festival offers long contracts and, other than theatres categorized by Canadian Actors' Equity as A+ houses (CAEA "Minimum Fee Booklet" 2), their minimum pay level is the highest in the country. Festival actors understandably fear not being 'asked back' and losing this stability, regardless of their age, experience, or prestige. One interviewee speaks to how career-long this fear is:

You just don't know. And...that's always been true about our business, really. You never know...the gigs are what they are, and they come when they come, or they don't. And that's why when you get a gig at a Festival, you've got eight months of work. You can

kind of breathe a little bit, but other than that you never know. You never know when it's going to just stop. And we all know these amazing actors who worked and worked all their lives, and then suddenly...they don't ...(Archive 203).

Beyond temporary relief from income insecurity, the Festival's "elite cultural capital" (Julian and Solga 197) also brings status, prestige, and the opportunity to work in a repertory system. So it is, without question, ethical on the part of scholars to do the scholarly equivalent of a Stratford swivel on behalf of the actors they interview. For their 2019 study of the Festival's diversity practices, Erin Julian and Kim Solga interviewed three cast members of Stratford's 2018 season *Comedy of Errors*. Their note on the study's ethics protocol reads: "In accordance with our ethics protocol, and in order to protect company members from any potential economic or social harm, we have fully anonymized all actor comments and feedback and refrained from quoting actor-interviewees directly. This is standard ethics practice when working with potentially vulnerable subjects" (208). Julian and Solga's decision is, without question, understandable given that the majority of the cast came from "historically marginalized" (195) groups outside of the dominant culture. However, while working with a similar population and with similar concerns about ethics, my study follows a different path. My aim is to protect the actors who agreed to participate in my study, while keeping their testimony at the heart of it. A consequence of Julian and Solga's efforts to protect actors is the de-centring of the actors' experiences, since their perspectives are made peripheral and thin. Mirroring the traditional power structure found in rehearsal halls at Stratford, the dominant voice in their study is that of the director. They are, in a sense, the protagonist: a well-intentioned artist struggling to achieve a genuinely diverse practice within an institution whose established practices and hierarchies do not allow for it. Though Julian and Solga are somewhat critical of the director's attempts to

integrate representations of trans and gender diverse people in the production (197), they have a voice and, according to the authors, an opportunity to control how that voice came across in print: “[They] read drafts of this chapter, and fed back thoroughly and generously to us” (193) and “[They have] been central to the crafting of this chapter and [have] pushed us all along the way to see our divergent perspectives in thoughtful counterpoint” (207). However, it was the cast of *Comedy of Errors*, as the authors take pains to illustrate, who were tasked with embodying, conforming to, and, ultimately, performing the director’s concept. Much of the chapter is dedicated to the actors’ acute discomfort with what they were asked to do (202). Regardless of the director’s empathy for the actors’ difficulties and their attempts to run an inclusive, democratic rehearsal hall, in the end, the cis-gender actors still had to find a way to play trans characters, in public for several months, long after the director’s work was done. The director had to endure some criticism; the actors had to endure the criticism plus six months of performing in a politically ambiguous, maybe problematic, production. But with the actors’ actual testimony suppressed in the study due to ethics protocols, the director’s testimony amplified, and their editorial suggestions taken into account, the individuals most compromised by the production and the Festival’s labour structure are denied a voice to express their lived experience of it. The authors were certainly right in attempting to protect the *Comedy of Errors* cast from “potential economic or social harm” (208). But without their testimony, the individuals the authors are attempting to support with their study are rendered as powerless within the study as they were in the process. My discomfort with this unsatisfactory consequence underpins my search in this thesis for a middle ground that protects actors without silencing or censoring them.

Julian and Solga are right to describe the actors as “potentially vulnerable subjects” (208) in the sense that their quoted remarks could have consequences. However, I question the extent

to which actors are genuinely different from other professionals being interviewed about their profession. Vulnerability has been defined in social sciences as a term

used to define people who lack the capacity to make decisions, due to physiological/psychological factors or status inequalities, and/or who experience impairing conditions that might constrain or diminish their physical and cognitive autonomy.... In this category, it is possible to include groups that are traditionally marginalized (e.g., people with HIV/AIDS), institutionalized groups (e.g., prisoners), groups without the mental capacity to consent (e.g., the mentally ill), groups that engage in risky behavior or have contact with/live in environments considered dangerous or impoverished (e.g., homelessness). (Augusto and Hilario x)

While the majority of Stratford actors certainly experience status inequalities within the institution, and many are from racialized and marginalized groups, none lack the capacity to make decisions. The assumption of vulnerability, in this case, might be symptomatic of a wider trend in which “the ethics review process has stretched the idea of vulnerability to such an unprecedented degree that it has hampered research” (van den Hoonaard 305). Part of de-infantilizing actors in both scholarship and institutional theatres, then, involves trusting them to assess their own level of power, status, and vulnerability. I am not suggesting that Julian and Solga were anything less than assiduously ethical and well intentioned; I am suggesting that if omitting actor testimony from Shakespearean performance studies is a “standard ethics practice” (208), it is certainly a loss to scholars attempting to understand Shakespearean performance, the institutions who specialize in it, and how the character of those institutions shape actors’ work.

I also view the subject with optimism in the direction of the Festival itself. Following the murder of George Floyd on May 25th, 2020, the Festival took an open, consultative approach to

addressing its history and culture of institutional racism and colonialism. They engaged Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) consultant Diversipro to undertake a comprehensive, quantitative survey of racialized Festival employees, along with many other wide-ranging, deeply considered measures outlined on their website (Stratford Festival “Anti-Racism”). Additionally,

in June of 2020 the Festival hired a group of 14 staff and artists to form an Anti-Racism Committee [ARC] to examine life at the Festival from a non-white perspective. Their paid work was conducted via interviews, as they examined seven of the Festival’s departments – Human Resources, the Acting Company, the Directors’ Office, Stage Management, Production & Design, Marketing & Publicity, and Education. (Stratford “Anti-Racism”)

Concomitant to ARC, the Festival has also instated a First Nations, Inuit and Métis Advisory Circle and expanded their network of artistic advisors to include artistic leaders from a wide range of IBPOC and LGBTQ+ groups (Stratford Festival “Anti-Racism”). In these on-going dialogues, those traditionally on the bottom of Festival hierarchy (racialized and/or marginalized actors) have been invited to speak openly about their experience working there. Within my archive, several of the actors also speak to the consultative position artistic director Antoni Cimolino took during the 2021 season, with one actor saying he *“made it very clear that he wants conversations and for us to feel like we can go to him with anything. That was one big one...he just wanted to hear more from everybody's experience. I could just tell that he wanted to listen more and he's quite open to learning”* (Archive 92). Rather than secret complaints in bars requiring the ‘Stratford swivel’, actor testimony about the Festival’s culture has suddenly become a necessary part of the Festival’s attempts to change and survive. My hope for future seasons of Festival actors is that the institution and its leadership retain this consultative position

and that rank-and-file actors offering feedback, at work or in scholarly discourse, starts to feel like less of a hazardous proposition for them.

Methodology

My primary method was ethnographic. I interviewed each of the fifteen adult cast members of the Stratford Festival's 2021 productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *R+J*. I did not interview Eponine Lee who played Juliet in *R+J* because she was a minor, both during the rehearsal and run of *R+J* and in the winter of 2022, which posed a trickier ethical dilemma; since my objective was, in part, to elicit actors' comparisons of this creation process and pre-Covid practices, I felt that omitting Lee was practical as well as ethical. In recruiting the actors for the study, I sent each a detailed information letter outlining the parameters of the study, what would be asked of them, and how and where their testimony would be used. If they expressed continued interest based on the letter, I asked them to sign a consent form. Within that process I made myself available to them via email (or messaging) to answer any clarifying questions they might have about me or the study. Prior to this study, I had worked with four of the actors as an actor. Though we were colleagues, not friends, and I exerted no influence in their personal or professional lives, I transparently addressed our professional relationship in the information letter and emphasized that should they decline to participate, it would have no negative impact on our relationship.

Grounded in scholarship on qualitative research, such as Brinkmann and Kvale's *Doing Interviews* and Iphofen and Tolich's *The SAGE Book of Qualitative Ethics*, the interviews were thematized tightly around the participants' professional experience working on these 'pandemic Shakespeare' productions. Participants were asked to engage in a single

semi-structured life-world interview...with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena... It comes close to an everyday conversation, but as a professional interview it has a purpose and it involves a specific approach and technique; it is semi-structured – it is neither an open everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire. (Brinkmann and Kvale 21)

The interviews were approximately one hour in length and conducted over Zoom in December 2021 or January 2022, at a time amenable to their schedule. Given the “semi-structured” nature of these interviews, all participants were asked the same questions, though not necessarily in the same order:

- Everybody has a slightly different story around the first lock down in March 2020.
What’s yours?
- What was the pandemic like for you before rehearsals began for *R+J/Dream*?
- How did you come to play (character name)?
- (For *R+J* cast members) What were the challenges/discoveries of the workshop in March 2021?
- When did you begin rehearsing in Stratford? Walk me through what rehearsals were like with Covid protocols. How did the days go?
- What was the effect of the Covid rules on rehearsing? How did it feel?
- (For experienced Shakespearean actors) As a veteran Shakespearean, how was it different working on Shakespeare with Covid protocols?
- (For actors who had worked at Stratford before) Generally, how was it different than being at Stratford pre-pandemic?

- Can you describe getting in front of audiences for the first time?
- What were the performances like with the Covid restrictions? How did the pandemic colour the performances emotionally?
- How do you think R + J/Dream spoke to audiences who'd all undergone the collective experience of the pandemic together?
- Why do you think Stratford decided to go ahead with a season?
- What was learned during that season that you'd hope carries through into Stratford's general culture?

During the interviews, I offered the actors the option to skip questions or to move on to a different line of questioning, if they felt any discomfort. If they regretted saying something or said something they felt was too vulnerable for this context, they were free to rephrase it or ask to have it excised from the interview on the spot. After completing the interviews, I transcribed the audio using Trint, a paid transcription software, then edited the transcriptions for length and clarity. Vital to the project of creating an ethical archive of the actors' testimony and reflecting my view that an ethical approach treats actors as competent adult professionals, I sent each actor their edited interview and asked them to make any cuts or rewrites they needed to feel comfortable with me using their testimony. I also reminded them of their right to withdraw their testimony from the project altogether. Nothing was used in this archive that they have not given their explicit written consent on; their final edits of the interviews are what appear in my study. Recognizing that artists should be paid for their time and labour, each actor also received a \$200 honorarium.

In this exegesis, I am following Bridget Escolme's instruction to use archives dialogically as "a conversation between actor testimony, scholarly voice and journalistic critical response that

endeavors to acknowledge that each comes from a different perspective and set of discourses” (89). To this end, I employed a mixed-method bricolage approach in my analysis, drawing on multiple critical frameworks. I viewed the testimony through the lens of contemporary Shakespearean performance theory around labour, disability, diversity, pandemic Shakespeare, the nature of the ‘Shakespearean actor’ in Western culture, as well as studies of Shakespearean Festivals and Stratford in particular. To situate Shakespearean performance practice in the context of the pandemic, I drew on journalism and social science around masking and distance. For my discussion of masking, I also used Affect Studies, such as Helen Nicholson's essay “Emotion,” to analyze the idea of thwarted emotional contagion in a time of literal contagion. Most importantly, though, in my effort to legitimize actor testimony in the study of “historically under-researched” (Prescott 51) institutions like Stratford, my emphasis was placing these actors’ testimony in dialogue with each other, with actors from Stratford’s past, with actors from similar institutions, and with my own perspective – also that of a Stratford actor. As an actor, my lens on the 2021 pandemic season is decidedly not one of expertise in theatre administration, governance, or production. I am not attempting to show a ‘better way of doing things’ at Stratford, nor do I pretend to know the myriad ins and outs of how a major arts institution functions. My aim was to illustrate that although individual process-based actor testimony tells us very little about theatrical institutions, an ethnography of a group of actors from the same production at the same institution can tell us a great deal. To best serve the actors’ safety, I retain their testimony, but refrain from naming them.

In building my archive, *Vaccines Are not the Only Balm*, I diverged from Escolme’s instructions and did not edit the actors’ interviews into dialogic thematic sections. Rather, following Shurgot’s lead, I “resisted the scholar's urge to summarize contrasting views and

instead allowed the actors to speak for themselves” (“Introduction” 14), with each actor’s testimony speaking to the others without an overly controlling editorial intervention. Since the casts of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *R+J* had such drastically different experiences due to the nature of the productions and rapidly shifting Covid regulations, however, the interviews are organized by production. The archive is not included in the online version of this exegesis for ethical reasons. All quotes from the archive are italicized.

The First Ones Back

‘The show must go on’ is one of the defining ideologies of theatre making. It is a phrase “used to assert that a performance or (in extended use) an event, activity, etc., must carry on as planned *regardless of difficulties or disruptions* (“Show Must Go On”, italics mine). During the pandemic, when the show decidedly could *not* go on, the cliché took on a strange (if understandable) prominence in the anglosphere theatre community’s collective psyche. A Google search of ‘2021 theatre the show must go on’ yields a staggering 995,000,000 results. Discussing the cancellation of the 2020 season, Stratford Artistic Director Antoni Cimolino said, “The motto ‘The show must go on!’ is bred in the bone and it’s therefore very difficult to break out of that mindset. But sometimes the show cannot go on” (Banger). Almost exactly a year later, the Festival showed the world just *how* bred in the bone the sentiment was and announced elaborate, expensive plans and precautions for a 2021 pandemic season. In a *Toronto Life* interview following the announcement, Courtney Shea asked Cimolino, “The show must go on?” and he answered, “Exactly” (Shea). The ideology is embedded in the minds of theatre makers from the top of the Canadian theatre community’s hierarchy (Cimolino) down to the bottom (non-performing understudies and swings). For the theatre community, the persistence of the

ideology is grounded in the real-life tenuousness of theatre existing at all . As John Steinbeck wrote, “The theatre is the only institution in the world which has been dying for four thousand years and has never succumbed. It requires tough and devoted people to keep it alive” (Steinbeck 17). To keep theatre alive, the show the *does*, indeed, have to go on. In the case of Stratford, when the show didn’t go on, the outlook was dire. The cancelled 2020 season resulted in \$4.3 million shortfall for the Festival (Stratford “Media Release 05/22”); Stratford, like most established Shakespeare festivals across North America, is “inseparable from the economic, cultural, geographical and even geological contexts from which they emerge” (Prescott 51). Because of the Festival, the town of Stratford “draws upwards of 1.7 million visitors each year. The Stratford Festival itself generates more than \$140 million in economic activity for the surrounding community. It also supports over 3,000 jobs in the area – 1,000 directly with the festival, and 2,000 indirectly through tourism and hospitality activities” (Ontario Arts Council). Most seasons, the Festival employs well over one hundred actors, with 146 actors in the 2023 company (Stratford “Cast and Creatives”). The stakes of the Festival’s survival are high for the theatre community and the town of Stratford itself. But the sharp edge of the show going on at all costs is that it is traditionally the “tough and devoted” performers who bear the physical and emotional brunt of it:

productions are by definition temporary, and the ethos of “the show must go on” carried the day [pre-pandemic], pushing traditional HR issues to the backseat as performers overcame sickness, injury, harassment, micro- or macro-aggressions to put on a great show—the mark of a true professional, as many people saw it. Actors and crew members were understandably afraid to rock the boat, concerned that their reputations might take a hit and hurt their chances for landing their next role. (Hewlin et al)

And when the show *cannot* go on, as Cimolino said, it also seems to be performers who bear the worst of it. When the 2020 Stratford season moved from postponement to cancellation, the entire acting company was abruptly laid off: “...*there was going to be a [company] town hall on Zoom...just everybody on their computer on Zoom with Antoni [Cimolino] and Anita [Gaffney, Stratford’s General Manager] and they said, Sorry. We have to let you all go. All contracts are gone*” (Archive 201). A month later, when the Festival received government funding to help cover wages, they were able to recall a huge number of full-time staff, but there was no recourse or help for the performers who were suddenly out of eight months of income. As independent workers, the actors were not contractually protected beyond the two weeks termination pay the Festival was obliged to pay (CTA “CTA 2021-2024” 78); they were also unable to collect Canadian unemployment insurance. CERB (Canadian Emergency Relief Benefit) eventually became available to actors or other independent contractors who needed financial assistance, but initially the Festival’s entire acting company was dropped into freefall. (Not incidentally, when the Festival returned to a full repertory production schedule in 2022, the laid off 2020 acting company were not promised a return to work. In fact, the company of Donna Feore’s *Chicago* was made to re-audition for their roles, without being offered a compelling reason why, causing a controversy across the Canadian theatre community (Nestruck “Why artists”). Both sides of the show must go on ethos – going on and *not* going on – protect the institution. As a rule, theatre is a precarious endeavour at the best of times and “Shakespeare festivals are complicated and hard-to-sustain organisms” (Prescott 51). The Festival’s General Manager (both now and in 2021) Anita Gaffney has spoken about the continual difficulty of running an organization as large and multifaceted as Stratford, saying “People think from the outside, ‘Ah, it’s been around for 60 years, it’s never gonna go away.’ But we live on a very thin, break-even budget each year.

Within a year, we have to make it all work – we have to sell the tickets, we need to raise the money. It’s a very challenging and delicate organization” (Ontario Arts Council). Gaffney’s family is deeply tied to the Festival’s identity and mythology. Her father, Oliver Gaffney, was the contractor who built the Festival Theatre, despite an initial lack of community support for the project. Artistic Director Antoni Cimolino began his career at the Festival in the acting ensemble in 1988, moving into directing and management under former Artistic Director Richard Monette in 1994. He then became the company’s General Director, with Des McAnuff as Artistic Director, for eight years, before being named Artistic Director in 2012 (Cimolino). In the press, he described the cancellation of the 2020 season as “heartbreaking on many levels” (Maga) and in *Toronto Life* he made the surprisingly vulnerable statement: “I felt so terrible that we couldn’t present theatre here last summer. It was an ache in my body” (Shea). As one actor admits,

I've probably talked to Antoni one or two times in my whole life and Anita [Gaffney, Executive Director] a few times more. But I could see legitimate pain in these people. And they both have wept openly. And I thought, It's so much more than just checks and balances here. This theatre is a huge central part of so many people's lives that it becomes a really intense motivation to make things happen because it's intensely meaningful. So I want to believe that part of the motivation was genuinely because they both...believe in the value of it. (Archive 116)

My goal is not to portray the Festival’s administration as mercenary or uncaring, but rather to show how choices that enabled the show to go on were experienced by the actors involved in making that happen.

This section outlines these casts’ experience of rehearsing under strict Covid guidelines and contingencies. Then, I contextualize the testimony of the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* cast

who, as the first to arrive at the Festival, were also the first actors to experience the Festival's new-minted policies.

2021 Covid Policies

During the pandemic "...the leakiness of all bodies becomes apparent; we all breathe, we all speak, we all cough. Breath emerges as 'a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid ... a disorder that threatens all order'" (Lupton 52). A casual touch was no longer casual; a cough could be deadly; a hug was suddenly unthinkable. What was previously mundane now meant "the difference between health and sickness, life and death" (Kourlas). This altered physical reality became especially fraught in the context of theatrical rehearsal where physical exertion, intimacy and proximity define so much of the work and "Singing, dancing, shouting, talking and breathing: all create respiratory droplets and aerosols" (Kircos 20).

In previous years, the Festival (like most Big Theatre institutions such as Shaw and Mirvish) relied on 'covers': understudies and, for musicals, swings to step into to the ensemble as needed. In the pandemic year, because of regulations around self-isolation after exposure, this was impossible because "*If one person gets sick, the whole Festival kind of goes down*" (Archive 192). This statement is not hyperbole. With the company forced to run their season in stock (one show at a time), if any actor contracted Covid, the potential exposures to their cast and crew meant the show, and, by default, the Festival's entire season, would have temporarily shut down. One actor notes: "*Because they were the first out of the box, everybody had their eyes on Stratford, so they didn't want to skirt any kind of rules or anything*" (Archive 101). The Festival's planning was thorough, painstaking, and in what one can assume is an understatement from Cimolino, "cost quite a bit" (Shea). Their minutely detailed 167-page "Pandemic: Reopening Safety Plan" was a carefully laid plan to "provide adequate and appropriate control

measures on the related hazards as identified in order to facilitate the prevention of contracting an illness resulting from a pandemic, virus or disease” (Kircos 4). These measures were implemented across the Festival, but within the Plan each production also had its own comprehensive plan to keep out Covid. Created “in strict adherence to guidelines from public health agencies” (Kircos 4), it was a staggering feat of planning. The Festival earned the “World Travel and Tourism Council’s Safe Travels designation, in recognition of the strict COVID protocols that [were]...in place throughout the Festival experience” (Stratford Festival “Media Release 06/21”).

The protocols followed public health guidelines at the time, and included the following provisions:

- Casts were limited to a maximum of 8 actors and “bubbled...to limit...interactions with other employees, and to mitigate any spread of possible contagion” (Kircos 44).
- Shows were rehearsed and produced in stock (one at a time) rather than in repertory (Stratford Festival “Media Release 06/21”)
- To avoid the social mingling, shows were limited to 90 minutes in length with no intermission (Stratford Festival “Media Release 06/21”)
- All Stratford employees including actors were subject to a daily health screening before they were permitted to enter Festival buildings (Kircos 24)
- All employees, artists, patrons, visitors and contractors were required to maintain a distance of at least 2 metres/6 ft. from one another while working and travelling through the facilities. Wearing a face covering was mandatory at all times, with limited exceptions for performers while rehearsing outdoors or performing

(Kircos 17)

- Employees and artists had to wear a mask or face covering at all times while in the facilities. Masks could be removed when eating, drinking or when performing on stage (Kircos 20)
- The director, stage management and creative team required in rehearsal halls were primarily stationary at a table or desk facing the artists rehearsing. The creative team and stage management desks had to be positioned 2 metres/6 ft. or greater from the artists rehearsing and distanced 2 metres/6 ft. apart from each other. Where closer interaction was absolutely necessary, individuals who interacted with an artist at a distance of less than 2 metres/6 ft. were required to wear a non-medical mask *and* face shield and to wash or sanitize hands (Kircos 41)
- All employees were rapid Covid tested every 2 days while working indoors and every 3 days while working outdoors (Kircos 65)

Each venue also had a “Covid Compliance Officer to...ensure compliance with the venue’s policy as it pertains to hygiene, onsite working conditions and conformity with the venue’s COVID-19 reopening plan...and will have the authority as directed by the Festival’s Health & Safety Manager to address any safety concerns that are noted” (Kircos 45). It is not an overstatement to say that the Festival did everything possible to ensure that no one got sick in 2021; “[They] didn’t have a single case of COVID. So whatever they were doing, they were doing it right” (Archive 164).

A Midsummer Night’s Dream

There is a tension between the upbeat press statements on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the actors’ testimony around their experience of rehearsing it. In his *Toronto Life* profile for

the pandemic season, Antoni Cimolino said, “Our two Shakespeare productions this year, *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*, are both about generational change, about kids turning to their parents and saying, ‘How did you mess this up so badly?’” (Shea). Also in *Toronto Life*, director Peter Pasyk said, “Antoni asked if I’d be interested in directing a production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* instead [of his postponed production of *Hamlet*]. To me, that seemed like the perfect choice for our return: a jubilant piece of theatre that celebrates theatre itself. Plus, what better show to stage outdoors in the middle of summer?” (Pasyk). The tension does not arise from connivance or guile on the part of Cimolino or Pasyk, but rather from the inevitable gulf between how a production is presented to the public and actors’ lived experience of it. As British actor Edward Petherbridge wrote of the RSC in the 1980s, making theatre in a repertory system with limited time and resources with an “ensemble” that is newly made every year is, at best, “*unideal*” (Jackson and Smallwood 42). Covid ensured that rehearsals for *Dream* were exponentially *more* unideal. Stratford’s well-oiled repertory system, honed over decades, had to undergo a rapid conversion into a “*stock*” (Archive 89) schedule – that is, one show followed by another, each making way for the next in the rehearsal and performance spaces to avoid overlapping and potential cross-contamination between casts. This was a difficult transition for a Festival accustomed to working with months of lead up to prepare for the beginning of rehearsals. Rehearsals were set to begin in person outdoors on May 20, 2021, but that week the Festival was in a “holding pattern” as the Ontario government analyzed available Covid data and assessed how and when to move forward with their Roadmap to Reopen (“Update”). For the time being, in-person rehearsals were forbidden. Rather than upsetting the carefully planned 2021 stock schedule and starting rehearsals later in the year, *Dream* rehearsals moved on-line to the Zoom platform. And though this period in which

rehearsals were on Zoom is a slight detour from my discussion around how the main Covid protocols (masking and distancing) played out, it gives us a clear example of how multiple perspectives on the same rehearsal practice – even only slight variations – make the institution a much larger player in a discussion of Shakespearean process.

Zoom

The pivot in Shakespearean performance to Zoom and other on-line platforms during the pandemic has been abundantly documented. In Pascale Aebischer's *Viral Shakespeare* and the Arden Shakespeare's *Lockdown Shakespeare*, the resourcefulness and imagination of companies of all sizes offering digital Shakespeare was read as a newly democratized approach to Shakespearean production. Watching Shakespeare performed at a high level was previously prohibitively expensive for many; now anyone could stream a production from the National Theatre, RSC or the Stratford Festival for a relatively low price. To stick with the Stratford Festival, for only \$10 a month a subscriber to stratfest@home could watch any of the Festival's filmed productions from before 2020. To put that in context, tickets to see Paul Gross play King Lear live in the 2023 season sell for between \$39 and \$194. The Festival has recently broadened its range of promotions such as Pay-What-You-Wish days, Bring-a-Friend, and 2-for-1 'Date Night' performances, but, for most, seeing theatre at the Stratford Festival remains a luxury. But unlike the previous online offerings of Big Theatre companies like Stratford or upstart groups like The Show Must Go-Online, no one involved in *Dream* was ever completely certain which medium they were rehearsing for. From Zoom to in-person rehearsals, how the production would be experienced was hanging by the thread of Covid numbers. One interviewee talks about the uncertainty of

never actually knowing from the time we started on Zoom, if we're actually going to have an audience. Not knowing when our first show is going to be due to the regulations of the government. So we're rehearsing something and they said, At the base level, we'll film it. So you don't know who you're getting ready to perform for. Are we just going to do a film version, that we get no feedback from the audience of how it plays? Or do we get an opportunity to do it in front of people? And how many people? Because the capacity of that theatre, socially distanced, was 100 folks. Now, was it going to be able to stay that? Was it going to be 50% of that? So all of these things going through your head. Trying to also...focus on the play and the journey of the play. It was a lot. (Archive 86)

In a process dictated by contingency, the actors were required to work in uncertainty, ‘pivot’ and adapt constantly – to deal with “a lot” - because their work was necessarily tied to their ‘leaky’ and infectable bodies. The value of the *Dream* cast’s testimony around Zoom and the other contingencies that followed is not their expressions of discomfort (which are numerous); it is not simply to say, ‘It was sometimes hard for the actors’. The value of the testimony lies in its heterogeneity: sometimes they agree, sometimes they do not. This lack of a unifying ‘point’ to their varied testimonies makes their archive difficult to square with thesis-driven argumentation, but usefully complicates views on practice. (This complicated view plainly contrasts the single-perspective character/process focused nature of most Shakespearean actor testimony). For instance, all of the actors had a different memory of how long Zoom rehearsals lasted depending on their emotional response to them and/or how much utility they found in them. “*I think it was four and a half or five weeks on Zoom...It felt long. A week on Zoom feels like two and a half weeks*” (Archive 75) vs. “*...we were on Zoom for three weeks because we couldn’t meet in person*” (Archive 84). Another points out that “*...we did two weeks of online rehearsal, which*

was basically two weeks of table work” (Archive 99). As seen in the testimonies below, though, there was a near consensus around the usefulness of Zoom beyond a certain point:

...because all eyes are on Stratford, because we're the first ones doing stuff...to their credit, but almost to a fault, they took everything very seriously. And so there was no way they were even going to do outdoor rehearsal. And so we did two weeks of online rehearsal, which was basically two weeks of table work and...I'm not that kind of actor. I like to roll up my sleeves. I want to do the work. I don't want to talk about it as much as we did. A few days...an hour a day when we started, whatever. But we don't have to do two weeks of it. (Archive 99)

We started rehearsing in May on Zoom. We were going to be on Zoom for a little bit just until these restrictions are lifted. Then we'll go into in-person. Outdoors, indoors: TBD. Then the restrictions got lengthened. So then we were on Zoom longer than we thought. And...you can get a lot of the table work stuff done [on Zoom]. Sure. No problem. But you're not really meeting people...You're not really jamming because we can't ever hear more than one person at the same time. (Archive 74)

We were on Zoom for three weeks because we couldn't meet in person. We were doing things like dance choreography online, but mainly talking about the play. And the weird thing about it is, here we are thinking...we're going to have so much time to do this bookwork, which is great. But at the same time, it got too academic...a lot of...academic digging that wasn't useful. (Archive 85)

[It was] a lot of table work, way more than I think I've ever done. Way more than I think Peter [Pasyk] even said he'd ever done. And we took our time with it...He got advice from somebody that doing table work or rehearsals over Zoom takes a bit longer. So we need to a lot more time...Hey we have this time, so let's just allot more time and patience to this work, as we do it for the first time...Zoom fatigue is a thing. And brain processing on your own without communal energy...it's just different effort, different energy. I know for myself...my brain can disappear and come back...Whereas in the room, it doesn't. It's not the same. People can look at their phones, get the text message on their screen. Suddenly it just comes and goes...And you try to be an adult for yourself and take all notifications off, but one day you might not...all that stuff, I think, comes into play. I think we were going ten to four [o'clock], some days we would go to five. (Archive 93)

I would say that the most difficult part about the Zoom...was just that there was ...this feeling of really understanding it [the text], and then when we did finally join a person, it was very disorienting...There is a whole other dimension where you're like, Oh my, I didn't have a pulse belly button down, or maybe even shoulders down. That's just in my head. And then trying to tip some of that understanding into my body was challenging because it was all here [in my head]. And we knew so much about the text, but that wasn't finding it always in the body. We found it with our brain. (Archive 107)

And finally :

we did table work or unit-ing and went through, and that was all really useful when we got to do it on our feet, because the unit-ing was great and something that I actually hadn't visited in a while. So we always...knew exactly what we were driving at in every scene, what each one was about in a very stripped down, visceral way, which I always appreciate. (Archive 119)

Beyond the interest of Shakespearean actors momentarily sharing the same performative container (and frustrations) as work-from-home employees in other professions, the variations in these actors' testimony do two things especially: they offer various responses to the same practice, complicating easy binaries about the rightness or wrongness, or the Goodness or Badness (Escolme 78), of any rehearsal practice; and they point to the difficulty of reconciling individual feelings and 'processes' vs. 'the show' and institution. Can the needs of individuals involved in a production all be weighed and considered if the show is to go on? By the beginning of *Dream*'s rehearsal process, the mental health issues associated with Zoom – "Zoom fatigue" or "Zoom gloom" – were long known; a year to the day before rehearsals began, in fact, the *Toronto Star* published an article titled "Got Zoom Fatigue? 3 Tips to Leading a 3-Dimensional Life" (Kirsch). And despite the proliferation of Zoom performances of Shakespeare's plays, the challenges of Zoom read as a checklist of what *prevents* embodied acting, Shakespearean or otherwise: "Using a video platform is generally agreed to be more psychologically demanding than a face-to-face contact for a number of reasons including a greater need to concentrate and the new experience of very close proximity of facial images and sometimes a bank of faces. It has been reported that individuals have reduced ability to interpret body language and cues, difficulty detecting humour and irony and difficulty relaxing into a natural conversation" (Nerys 164). The six "root causes of Zoom fatigue" as studied by René Riedl similarly might be called

‘What You Don’t Want When You’re Acting’: asynchronicity of communication, lack of body language, lack of eye contact, self-awareness, unnatural interaction with multiple faces, and multitasking (Riedl 159-163) (Having done multiple Zoom play readings, rehearsals, and performances since March, I will add that the most troubling aspect of Zoom for an actor is not knowing where to look. Your instinct is to seek eye contact with your scene partner. On Zoom, if you look at your scene partner’s eyes, they see you as looking away. If you look directly into the camera, they perceive you to be looking directly at them, but then you are not able to see their expression. In both scenarios, at least one actor feels disconnected and unable to read emotional cues.) A year into near constant Zoom use, the *Dream* cast and creatives were well aware of the mental health downsides of Zoom and, undoubtedly, of its limitations as a rehearsal tool. Yet multiple weeks of rehearsal occurred on Zoom, despite the majority of the actors’ being unable to derive much value out of the process past a certain point. Obviously, none of them were harmed during Zoom rehearsals. The rehearsals allowed the cast to study the play together, unpack the language and clarify the play’s action whilst staying infection-free. As one cast member suggests, Pasyk was attempting to move gently and slowly through the text. He recognized the limitations of what can be truly ‘learned’, from an acting perspective, over a medium where you can’t really “*jam*” (Archive 74). Some of the cast even identified actable takeaways from the period, and found value in ‘uniting’ the text, for example. One participant even saw the Zoom rehearsals as a “*master class*” (Archive 107) in Shakespearean text analysis. On a basic level, too, the Zoom rehearsals gave the cast an opportunity to get know each other, even if that knowledge was heavily mediated and incomplete. Pasyk and the Festival, like the rest of the world, were making the best of a hard situation contingent on Covid numbers and the province’s response to those numbers. Nonetheless, the Zoom rehearsal period for *Dream* was

in-step with a ‘show must go on’ mentality that did not budge from its course despite the actors’ discomfort.

The Parking Lot: Heat, Masks, and Distance

The Festival announced their 2021 season as a metamorphosis but also a “harkening back” (Stratford Festival “Media Release 04/21”) to the days under the tent. When in-person rehearsals were finally allowed to commence for *Dream*, provincial Covid regulations dictated that they occur outdoors or not at all. The site selected for these rehearsals was the parking lot of the Festival costuming warehouse on Brunswick Street, one of Stratford’s main east-west arteries. In practice, the harkening back went beyond cozy nostalgia, as we see in the parallel testimony of actor William Hutt describing rehearsals for the Festival’s inaugural 1953 season and a *Dream* cast member on their rehearsals in the parking lot.

William Hutt:

...romantic as the tent was, it was impossible. I mean, it was not soundproof, it was hardly rainproof. And it was a steam bath. (Ouzounian 33)

Dream cast member:

what was funny is that, as we just got off of Zoom for three weeks, that first day there was a torrential rainfall that basically tore everything apart. The main tent that was over our playing space stayed put because it was anchored down by water barrels at each corner. But the stage management tents were broken and blown away. It was a mess. And that's how we started day one of rehearsal. (Archive 85)

After this minor catastrophe on day one, rehearsals continued apace in the parking lot. The situation, by most of these actors' descriptions, was, in many ways, just as *unideal* as Zoom. One actor communicates sincere gratitude; they also speak to the disconnect between the elaborate care around Covid protocols and the seemingly haphazard care of the actors in the actual playing space:

The first day of in-person rehearsal felt kind of how every first day feels, but with...an extra giant scoop of gratitude for...the anticipated real time-space connection. Everyone having gone through...a pandemic year and a quarter and...having missed...the opportunity to play in-person for in-person audiences. I think that was like a major landmark for me, was just gratitude...I was also just trying to remind myself that this is a gift, not in the way of, Oh, thank you so much, Stratford Festival, but like...we could all have just kept going last year and not been here. And so...welcome, everybody. I see you where you're at...

When we finally got together in person, we were in the costume warehouse parking lot...We couldn't meet indoors. So...we would...do our screening. And then go there. Inside the warehouse you had to check in with the screener and then get a coloured bracelet saying you're A-OK for the day. And then we would rehearse outside. There were those interlocking playmats on the parking lot concrete. Did not offer much support, I'll tell you that much. And there was a tent over what had been taped out as...the staging area. And then there was a stage management table under another tent...maybe six or 12 feet away. And then we each had...a chair with our name attached to it. Couple of pencils...a clock...that was our little station, which...get sanitized and they're placed socially distant away from one another. There was...no touching. (Archive 75 and 76)

Another cast member elaborates on the various discomforts of the rehearsal set up:

....we just had an events tent over that [playing space]...But nothing shielding us when you're not on stage. And it was June, so it was scalding hot out, there were days where it was like 30 degrees. And when you're not on stage, you're in the blistering sun. Or you're in the whipping wind or you're in drizzle or rain...it was just like...what the hell is going on? And so they tried to put up other little things. They had this snow fence around so that Looky Lous wouldn't get too close. And so we're like, Can we at least push this fence behind those trees so we can sit under the trees? Because they had it just...in front of the trees...And so they did they move the fence back so that we could...at least get shelter under the trees. (Archive 99)

As with Zoom, though, the testimony offers multiple perspectives on the same situation. It is neither all Good nor all Bad. This actor talks about transitioning from Zoom to in-person and the (now common) experience of suddenly meeting individuals in-person whom you have only met on Zoom:

to spend that much time every single day with somebody you've never met, that you feel close to, and yet you still have no idea what touching their hand might be like. So it felt kind of like a newborn baby just taking in this new world...just looking at everybody fully and taking them in, which obviously happened very quickly. But I remember just...experiencing this full-fledged human being in a new way that I've never experienced with anybody else before. The first time we were in a circle...I just remember that everybody's eyes were so curious and open and...that was a very cool moment. (Archive 94)

In her profile on the directors of the 2019 *Dream* in High Park, the Canadian Stage Company's annual outdoor Shakespeare production in High Park, Toronto, Karen Fricker writes, "Raccoons, skunks, squirrels, caterpillars and mosquitos. Punishing heat and the threat of rain. A shared cast and doubled-up rehearsal schedule. Editing a famous text down to half its length. All of these are challenges that come with directing Shakespeare in High Park..." (Fricker). Though Fricker is focused on the shows' directors here (not the actors dealing with the elements night after night), the challenges she lists line up with Stratford's *Dream* cast's stories. (I will address remuneration later, but there seems to be an inverse relationship between the number of elements a Shakespearean actor in Canada endures and how much they are paid.) General discomfort and contending with the elements are not an unusual or pandemic-related aspect of actors rehearsing Shakespeare outside. It was the addition of Covid protocols that made these actors' experience a first in the Festival's history.

Masking

While contending with the elements was not novel for actors rehearsing and performing outdoor Shakespeare, contending with the elements while masked was. During the period in which masking was provincially mandated, facemasks became highly politicized, meaning-laden social objects whose presence or absence on the human face bore with it cultural, political and moral meanings (Lupton et al 2): "Somehow this seemingly benign utilitarian object has acquired cultural symbolisms beyond its clearly functional purpose, in ways reminiscent of the misinformation, conspiracy, claims, and partisanship associated, for example, with the antivaccination movement" (St-Amant et al 2). But the 'to mask or not to mask' debate and its nasty cultural battles did not play into the 2021 season. For the show to go on, the imperative

was unambiguous: always be masked. In the *Midsummer Night's Dream* protocol appendix in the Festival Return to Work guidebook, the rules for masking were as follows.

- Directors and choreographers standing to interact with the artists must add a face shield over their 3-ply mask if getting closer than 9 feet
- Masks are required in the rehearsal canopy. At a later date, we will consider removing masks when it is appropriate. Face shields will be provided to be used with a mask if/when required or desired (Kircos 149)

I will note here that where Covid protocols were concerned, directors, choreographers and stage management were subject to the same – and occasionally more rigorous – rules. I will also say that during periods of mandated masking, my bias was unequivocally pro-masking and I am not debating whether the actors should have been made to mask.

Curiously, masking presented challenges to communication that paralleled some of the challenges of Zoom. These challenges were shared by anyone who had to work and communicate masked but were exacerbated by the demands of Shakespearean acting in hot weather. In their chapter on the “Embodiments of COVID mask use”, Lupton et al itemize the challenges of mask use, which, like the challenges of Zoom, read like a laundry list of things Shakespearean actors explicitly do not want in their practice:

With the lower half of the face obscured, modes of expression and communication are dramatically altered. Voices are muffled by fabric and a person’s repertoire of facial expressions is dramatically diminished. Not being able to see people’s faces can be affectively and relationally disorienting... facial expressions involving the mouth are much more difficult to interpret while wearing a mask... Depending on the material used

and layers of thickness, some face masks can make breathing much harder... The sensory experience of communicating and speaking is also significantly affected by wearing a mask... the way that voice is produced through an assemblage of parts of the body (the skull, the vocal cords, tongue and so on), with the air and objects in the vicinity...the voice is an achievement of spatiality, not simply the individual's body. Face masks become part of this environment and the capacity for sound shifts, creating different resonances and sensations. (Lupton et al 39-41)

In addition to these barriers to communication and breath, the *Dream* cast also referred to the occurrence of “*maskne*” over the course of the process (Archive 101): a form of acne or skin irritation arising “from the sweating that occurs on the face underneath a mask or the high humidity inside the mask, as well as inadequate mask washing that fails to remove bacteria that have accumulated during extended wear” (Lupton et al 39).

These actors' testimony around the difficulty of masking protocols was unanimous, most succinctly summed up by the participant who said “*Shakespeare in masks is hell. It's garbage*” (Archive 153). To draw from my own life, having rehearsed a production of Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* in masks in the heat of summer of 2022 in a non-air-conditioned space, I can attest that the combination of sweat, impaired breathing, and diminished ability to read others' emotions is, for an actor doing vocally demanding work, a kind of hell.

As we have already seen, though, the slight variations in testimony give us a range of responses to what masking meant to the work of rehearsing Shakespeare. Like this actor, some found the vocal limitations of facemasks uncovered new avenues of exploration and communication physically.

[The masks] were really tricky because [acting Shakespeare] is like singing. I mean, there's so much articulation that has to happen and so much of it was then just spit, you'd end up in a wet mask...It was [so important] to have the sound go beyond the mask...and certainly being outdoors, working a lot harder by pushing. And so then – which was fun, which I'm just remembering now - with the mask, as we know from mask work, that then you have to activate the body because you can't rely on facial expressions...so the body had to tell a greater story than the face, which was also very liberating... there is a specificity that I found in the movement and...there's nothing arbitrary, no movement...is pedestrian. That just felt better to have everything be deliberate...it just happened in my body that way. (Archive 133)

One actor also found masks challenging from a respiratory and vocal perspective, reflecting a lesson they learned in how emotion is communicated on stage.

...you're doing so much more with your eyes than you would normally do because that's all you have to work off and see. And I never really realized how much I, as a person and probably as an actor, watch people's mouths when I'm speaking to them. And it...was really off-putting not to be able to see someone in an acting situation without seeing their whole facial expression. It was really interesting. I haven't done a lot of mask work, I guess, although it's the other way around...you see the mouth, but not the eyes...

You find yourself getting light-headed, short of breath, in the middle of the speech. Where you would normally breathe to the end of the sentence and you couldn't get there...it was so bizarre. And then your whole body changes because your body is lacking oxygen because you can't get enough in, because you're taking heavy breaths in, but your mask is cutting it off. It's like self- waterboarding. The inside of your mask is getting all wet from

your breath because it's so hot and it's just gross...in rehearsal you're breathing so much, you would get acne or pimples or 'mask-ne'...So it was tough. (Archive 100)

Without the ability to read their fellow actors' facial expressions, this performer found themselves drawing their responses more from the "story and the script" than from their fellow actors' expressions and responses. Rather than responding to an incomplete communication from a fellow actor, they imagined what the story suggested and responded to that, much like film, TV, and motion caption actors are sometimes required to do:

It's really interesting because we had seen everybody's faces for three weeks over Zoom, but then you get in person, and you see half their face. And, yes, the eyes are everything, but...there's so much information in the full face when you're working off somebody... It's interesting to experience an actor and their work half covered because, in a way, we were getting half the information. And I would have never believed that because you think the soul is in the eyes and you can get so much. But you can't...You can't get everything.

It was easier to work with actors that I had worked with before because I knew them personally. But with actors...that I didn't know, I couldn't quite get a feel, until we're on stage and I can experience a full human being. I can see them responding to me as a human being. So it's just so interesting that one cloth right here, on a singular spot, can actually take away a bit of connection...Quite a bit...

You get zero information...So as a human being, we can feel that happening, that you get zero information. But then as an actor, it's your job requirement to get that information,

to get all the information from your fellow actor. So there was a bit of a disconnect, which made us rely more on the script and the story. (Archive 95)

These actors' off-putting sense that "you can't get everything" when attempting to read the emotions of a masked individuals finds ample support in psychology. Studies revealed:

that emotion recognition was strongly reduced with the exception of "frightened" and "neutral" faces. If fearful emotion could be perceived thanks to the eyes, neutral emotion was overrepresented, since many emotional states such as "happy", "sad" and "angry" were misinterpreted as neutral. Hence, the genuine emotional state was not perceived anymore. (Coutrot)

In Helen Nicholson's formulation, emotion and Covid have a key similarity: they are both highly "contagious" (20). With masks hampering both the spread of Covid and the communication and perception of emotion, emotion was not "catching" (20) in masked rehearsals, meaning the actors essentially could not act until de-masking was permitted and they could experience "*the full human being*" (Archive 95). In their testimony around performing for masked, distanced audiences, the actors also articulated the difficulty of playing comedy for audiences whose mouths were covered; what laughter happened was muted, and smiling was not readable (Archive 197). The actors' testimony around breath has similar weight in the realm of Shakespearean rehearsal practice. The importance of breath control is a recurring theme in practical texts on the subject of voice for classical acting, like Cicely Berry's classic *The Actor and the Text* or Patsy Rodenberg's *The Right Speak*, and a staple of traditional Shakespearean training. In Grace Lydiatt Shaw's ethnography about the Festival's founding, actor Kate Reid says: "Mr. [Tyrone] Guthrie [the Festival's founding artistic director] said that you must be able to speak ten lines in one breath" (97). Stratford star William Hutt said:

So, if the thought process is clear and you can speak to the end of the thought, the rhythm of the speech will simply be there. Another example, “O what a rogue and peasant slave am I! Is it not monstrous, that this player here, / But in a fiction, a dream of passion, / Could force his soul so to his own conceit / That from her working, all his visage wann’d; / Tears in his eyes, distraction in’s aspect, / A broken voice, and his whole function suiting / With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing!” (Hamlet, II.ii.502-4). All one thought. And whoever plays that should be able to say it all in one breath...You have to be able to breathe Shakespeare like you breathe opera. (Maher 159)

A *Dream* cast member describes how masking impeded this traditional Shakespearean athletic ability (or aspiration) and undercut a basic part of making sense of Shakespeare, the ability to speak long thoughts:

And we are now outside in the heat, masked up and trying to speak Shakespeare, which wasn't fun. The breath capacity that is needed for those thoughts of argument now became hard because the particular masks that we were using at the time...you're breathing out and you try to breathe in, you get a mouthful of masks. So it feels like you're waterboarding yourself, in a sense, because you can't get the air that you need...Walking around with a mask is fine. You can regulate your breath, but as soon as you get actively engaged, then the body's need for the air becomes greater. You need more. It's athletic. There'd be times, getting going and trying to breathe and realizing that nobody at this particular moment is on stage, taking the mask off and breathing, staying still, trying not to spread my own carbon dioxide on everybody....And then as soon as somebody is getting close to coming back on, putting the mask back on and

trying to then calm yourself down, so that you can try and regulate your breath. So the mental/physical toll was hard. (Archive 85)

Their colleague made a similar observation about the mask as a barrier to the long-winded nature of Shakespearean acting:

The fullness of expression I find really lost or I found lacking. ...My voice sounds different. The contact of stuff on my face...I'm trying to breathe, for example, a longer phrase of thought and I inhale mask. I got fibres and stuff in my teeth. It was really uncomfortable. (Archive 78)

Several cast members were cast in multiple roles in *Dream*. Their experience of masking and Covid protocols was intensified, as they had very few rests in the 90 minutes of the show.

I was going to explain the multi-character running business...where we'd be a character and run off and change...But to do that in the mask, in the blazing hot sun...there were some days, where...your frustration became part of your engine because it was just so hot and trying to get a full breath for a line and also release your voice out, where it's not just banging you back in the face, was really hard. And I could feel that frustration. It was just the endurance of that, on top of the endurance of just playing multiple characters. And on certain days, you felt like a superhero because you're like, I'm really pushing myself and it feels amazing to work that hard. And then on other days, it was like, Man, I really wish I could go off harder on what this is actually about and I wasn't spending energy on these things that...felt in the way or just a distraction. (Archive 109)

The *R+J* cast express similar things about masking – incomplete communication, difficulty reading emotion, trouble breathing and being heard – but the *Dream* cast member was correct

who said, “*Everybody else after us had it easier*” (Archive 20). By the time *R+J* began rehearsals, indoor air-conditioned rehearsals were allowed, so masking was no longer coupled with as much sweat and heat; though one *R & J* cast member says “I would always have an extra mask in my pocket because if you cry or really spit, then it's just full and you end up with this rash” (Archive 152), no one from *R+J* likens masking to “self-waterboarding” (Archive 85 and 101).

Social Distancing

Social distancing (or physical distancing) played a more complex role in these shows’ rehearsal processes. In the case of *Dream*, distancing was a requirement early in rehearsals, and, like masking, proved to be an obstacle to instinct.

The expectation was that we would stay distanced which is a real challenge when you're still blocking, because I think so much of our instincts are about following an impulse and taking a risk and following through on where your character wants to move, as information for the director. And...you had to self-impede, stymie those impulses in order to follow those protocols. So there was this sort of stilted clumsiness to that part of it.

(Archive 108)

Also:

A month into rehearsals [in Stratford]...[Covid] was officially in Canada. Then rules started to change in regards to rehearsal. Everybody tried to stay six feet apart...for stuff that we'd already started to do. So...we're trying to recalibrate the actor brain and saying, Oh, my impulse is to go jump on this person and give him a big hug. And now I

can't do that. It was very heavy. The actor senses were very paralyzed, in a sense.

(Archive 82)

In an account of *R+J* rehearsals, one *R+J* actor observes that not only was distance mandatory, but stage management was also tasked with enforcing it:

Just within the rehearsal process, I remember doing a scene and we would get really close and then told that we can't do that. Someone would say, Hey. And we're like, Oh, right. We could snap out of it. Which was difficult in itself. And...sad to go through as an actor, but we had to make it work. (Archive 173)

Social distancing denied these actors a major tool: the ability to play freely. It also placed these productions' stage management and creative teams in the unasked-for, unwanted role of policing their casts. But for its downsides, another actor points out, distance is not necessarily a negative in theatre, especially Shakespearean theatre : it might be “*a gift*” (Archive 183). In fact, in a strange turn of events, the 2021 season might be the first time in the Festival's history that a virus enforced effective stage craft to play the thrust stages at the Festival and Tom Patterson theatres.

I think in a way the social distancing is useful to Shakespeare, because so much of the impulse is always to close that distance, get really close to your partner, and to reach and change them in some way. And what's always being stressed are these long Elizabethan angles, long Jacobean angles, where you're using the thoughts flying out of your head to change the person. And outside, distanced, you really have to use the auditory medium more than the physical, which is obviously a good challenge. It's something I always hear about, in my limited exposure to the history of all this stuff, is

that everyone back in the Elizabethan era had a much sharper ear. So it was a great test to...get back to that in a way. (Archive 120)

The trick to playing the Festival and Tom Patterson theatres' thrust stages, many Stratford actors would argue, is, in fact, to maintain physical distance when you have an impulse to close it; once distance is closed between two actors, fewer and fewer spectators have access to what's happening between them. Where Zoom and masking makes actors illegible to each other, distance leads to greater actor readability onstage. In this sense, distancing may have brought these actors closer to traditional "Shakespearean acting at Stratford" than more naturalistic physical proximity would have. (You can see actors and directors using distance and those stages' diagonals in abundance on recorded productions for stratford@home. These techniques are especially clear in Shakespearean productions shot on the Festival stage, such as Antoni Cimolino's 2014 production of *King Lear*.) In this instance, a Covid protocol may have felt anathema to the naturalist dictates of "the Stanislavskian system/American Method traditions of Shakespearean theater in the UK and North America" (Julian 100), but it might have been an unintentional technical help to actors playing raised platforms outside.

Monetary Rewards, Emotional Rewards

Saying Yes and doing the embodied physical and emotional work and risk required by directors, producers, and theatre companies to ensure the show goes on is, for most actors, a defining part of their careers. Most actors are not renowned, famous, or financially stable enough to exercise power or status within the hierarchies they are hired to work in. Very few actors have what is coarsely referred to in the entertainment industry as "Fuck you money". As ACTRA Toronto Treasurer Richard Young wrote, "Performers are precarious workers, by any definition of the term...hardship is a reality for most performers" (ACTRA "Press Release"). Most actors

need the work and, as a result, find it risky to attempt “upward communication” (Milliken et al 1455) or to say No to power. At the Stratford Festival, actors have been in this relation to power, hierarchy and money from the Festival’s very first season. In critic Richard Ouzounian’s *Stratford Gold*, we find the testimony of actors and creators who have since become renowned, but, at the time, were apprentice actors working under the Festival’s first artistic director, English director and producer Tyrone Guthrie. Renowned Canadian actor-turned-writer Timothy Findley tells the following story:

Guthrie was incredibly tall, but he didn’t look down his nose at you. He never bent his head to look. He looked out at everything. And he discovered early on in rehearsals that I had been a dancer and that I had some athletic skill. Now, my character Catesby had to come in at the moment when Richard is alone on the stage saying “A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!” And the whole stage was in darkness except for one spotlight on [Alec] Guinness, as Richard. And Guthrie said, “How would you feel, Findley, if you jumped off the balcony. We want a surprise entrance.” Jump off the balcony in the dark? With only this spotlight, and I knew I had to miss that because there stood himself [Alec Guinness]. So I had to go up the stairs in the dark at the back of the balcony and then break through the curtain, run onto the balcony and leap. I had to do it like that. I couldn’t look. I couldn’t do anything. Well, I never landed on Guinness and I never broke my legs, but it was really scary...But Guthrie asked of you that you do things like that. He didn’t shy away from saying “Look, come. Come up. Be better. Do more.”...He was a magical character. (Ouzounian 54)

Sixty-eight years after Findley jumped off a balcony for Tyrone Guthrie, the actors performing in the Festival’s 2021 season were jumping off a figurative balcony in the dark of

their own. They came to the Festival changed by the cataclysm of the pandemic and, specifically, the career-halting crisis of theatres closing worldwide. They were tasked with performing Shakespeare under Covid protocols that impeded breath and impulse. On the day of the season's opening, July 13th, 2021, the pandemic was still active, with Ontario logging 146 new Covid cases and 7 more deaths (Mitsui). Vaccinations help speed the re-opening process in Ontario, but at that point the effectiveness of the vaccines had yet to be determined. The risk of performing at Stratford was certainly less than that of a health care worker, first responder, or even a cashier or Uber driver (Gamio), but it was a risk, nonetheless. And with the risk came the additional emotional labour of feeling individually responsible for the show going on at the Stratford Festival. One actor connects his sense of the Festival's tenuousness during the pandemic season to his own economic insecurity as an actor:

... one of the things that was huge, very looming in the back of my mind was, If one person gets sick, the whole Festival kind of goes down....As an actor, the relationship with job security is very frail. I never expected job security. And then...here's a three-and-a-half-month contract, which is a pretty nice contract...And then being like, It can be taken away from you without your control...It was a stressor working every day, being like, I don't know how I can act with a mask on. And yet, if I don't, I risk everyone's jobs. So there's a lot of a lot of pressure with that. (Archive 192)

This sense of personal responsibility for the Festival's well-being is echoed by several of his colleagues:

I think something I did feel...there's definitely a like, Holy shit. I can't get sick. Holy shit. I can't get sick. I can't get sick... So there was a weight to existing and I never went to the gym. Not that I make assumptions about the kind of people at the gym...I went to one

grocery store. Because we only got to do the show like 42 times. So I wanted to make sure we did all 42 times. That was probably the grossest feeling. (Archive 152)

One actor speaks of the same fear, but with the added factor of isolation:

There was a lot on the line that season. If anyone got sick, the show wouldn't happen. And we were all going back to our places and not living the way that actors usually live, which is a more social way, hanging out and learning about what's on the horizon for people...there was a sense that you really don't want to let everything down because you felt so lucky to be there and to be doing it after all this time off. And Stratford, which is just putting this thing out there and...maybe for the sake of everything surviving. That's dramatic. But, you know, I'm an actor, so that's what it felt like. (Archive 124)

These actors' colleague shared their sense of responsibility for the Festival's well-being (Archive 183), but added a critique of the way the Covid-amplified show must go on ethos affected actors' salaries that season:

I wonder if the downside of that the COVID thing is really putting...the corporate identity of Stratford front and centre. Because all the testing was to keep it open...no negotiating, take what you get in this tough time for accommodation. We're staying open. It's all for the company...I was not allowed to negotiate or anything. It was like, That's just the way it is. It's tough times. I'm going, Yeah, but you know, then you're unveiling the Tom Patterson. The idea that the institution is the first and foremost thing and that the artists who are struggling in this pandemic, that we take the hits of the lack of jobs and then we take the hits when the jobs do come. So, we're supposed to ensure the survival of the institution and be grateful...rather than Stratford taking that on. And that's mean to say,

because they obviously to take on stuff, but I'm not sure about the idea of COVID being used to protect institutions as opposed to the individuals, which kind of dovetails up to companies taking COVID relief and not paying the employees properly...So it was really aggravating...for them to say, 'no, no negotiation, there it is.' But then you're going, 'how much for rent?' So I'm subsidizing the theatre and the landlord because I want to do a play.... (Archive 185)

For the 2021 Covid Stratford Addendum to the Canadian Theatre Agreement, Equity negotiated a 1% increase in the minimum actor fee at the Stratford Festival to \$1,295.94 weekly (CAEA “2021 COVID-19 Addendum”). As I stated in my introduction, this minimum fee is one of the higher weekly fees in the country. However, from a typical actor’s paycheque, an immediate 10% is paid out in agent’s commission, along with Equity working dues, and insurance (CAEA “CTA Actor Fee Calculator”). On top of these deductions, Stratford actors who do not permanently reside in Stratford are obliged to rent or share an expensive ‘Stratford housing’ unit, the majority of which are considerably more than \$1,295.94. An actor could easily, therefore, be paying more than a quarter of their earnings back simply to live in Stratford. In regular seasons, the Festival’s minimum fee could be negotiated, depending on the status of the performer, the role(s) they are being asked to play, their years at the Festival, and the skill and tenacity of their agent. For the pandemic season, though – as the above reference to “no negotiation” indicates – the Festival instituted a ‘favoured nations’ approach to actor payment: all performers got the same amount. While younger performers with less experience (and less pay) might have viewed this change as a move towards a more equitable pay among company members (Archive 160), another way to understand it is as an aggressive assertion of ‘the show must go on’ mentality, putting the survival of the Festival ahead of actors’ ability to negotiate a wage commensurate

with their age, experience, value, and living expenses. As this actor points out, no expense was spared for Covid protocols, the award-winning new Tom Patterson Theatre, or in erecting the “bajillion dollar pavilions” the pandemic shows were performed under (Archive 183). But expenses were certainly spared in paying the actors; and the actors were, indeed, subsidizing the show going on at the Stratford Festival.

The (Other) Elephant in the Room

Over and above working with Covid protocols and carrying the physical and emotional weight of the show going on, 2021 was the first season in the Festival’s history that anti-racism and anti-oppression work became a formalized part of performing at the Festival. By not placing the actors’ response to this work at the heart of my paper, it might be argued that I ignored the ‘elephant in the room’ regarding culture change at the Stratford Festival. Ten out of the fifteen of the actors I interviewed for this archive come from racialized or marginalized groups, which is both a sign of progress at the Festival and a signal that ‘the elephant’ was part of the lived reality of the rehearsal room. It is, perhaps, impossible to completely separate that cultural change from the Covid protocols that are the focus of my analysis. For the first time in 2021, Stratford actors, along with the Covid protocols I’ve described as part of the rehearsal process this year, participated in a

multi-day orientation session prior to the start of rehearsals for each production. In addition to delivering anti-racism and anti-oppression training and an overview of the Festival’s policies and procedures, the orientation session allows time for the teams to get to know one another and to take part in developing a community agreement that will shape the work plan through the rehearsal period. (Stratford Festival “Anti-Racism”)

The work done on these Pre-Rehearsal Orientation (PRO) days is necessarily confidential. Even though some of the cast mentioned elements of the PRO, they could not discuss it in detail. The testimony these actors *did* provide and consented to share around racism/anti-racism, colonialism/anti-colonialism, though, offers a varied archive of how IBPOC, disabled, and/or LGBTQ+ actors approached the Festival following the events of the pandemic and how the Festival's early anti-racist and anti-oppression efforts were received and processed by these actors. This work was still, in 2021, in its early days. As stated on the Festival's Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Update page on their website, "These initial steps will set the course for the entire Festival community serving as a catalyst to inspire continued evolution" (Stratford Festival "Anti-Racism"). Since their initial steps in 2021 and the publication of the "78-page report generated by the Anti-Racism Committee (ARC)" (Stratford "Anti-Racism"), the Festival's approach to anti-racism and anti-oppression has certainly evolved; trying to assess the earliest incarnation of their work in this direction, during the fraught and precarious (post) pandemic season, did not seem just or helpful, or even possible. It is best to leave both the Festival's policies at the time and the actors' testimony about it in 2021. However, since these policies had "the aim of making room for safe and healthy processes that consider everyone in order for Artists to bring their full selves to work and to the art they are making" (Stratford Festival "Anti-Racism"), they are something more than peripheral to my analysis. Regardless of how individual actors responded to the actual manifestations of anti-racism and anti-oppression work at the Festival in that season, it was (and is) another piece of labour Festival actors were (and are) required to do. As the first company of actors back after a traumatizing pandemic, these actors were hired to embody their roles in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *R+J* during an active pandemic, in a culture that had also changed and was changing as a result of social

movements that are, themselves, inextricable from the pandemic context. They were also required to embody and be the public face of the Festival's vision for "a new beginning, imbued with much needed social and political change" (Stratford Festival "Anti-Racism"). It was, as I said, a very tall order for an actor.

Conclusion

The 2021 Stratford Festival season showed the Festival to be taking steps forward in terms of anti-racism and diversity practice, while also offering the beleaguered town of Stratford and the broader theatre community a "balm" (Archive 80) in a time of "significant fractures" in society (Makaryk and Prince 3). Many of the actors expressed gratitude for the employment and articulated the emotional rewards of participating in these productions. The productions and, more importantly, the season happening was – to use a word I have been avoiding until now – Good. But whether they were grateful, "Fucking hated it" (Archive 100), or somewhere in between, for these actors there was "a cost" (Archive 158). And yet, the other side of Timothy Findley's story about leaping off a balcony so Tyrone Guthrie could have the show he wanted is Findley's evident affection for Guthrie, despite Guthrie's lack of concern for his physical safety. In Findley's telling of the story, Guthrie is not a monster or tyrant, he is an artist striving to achieve the most thrilling production of *Richard III* possible. By following Guthrie's direction of leaping off the balcony, Findley got what actors seek from acting in theatre: hyper-alive, hyper-present, adrenalized meaning-making. From rehearsing in a "big tin barn" where "you couldn't hear anything because when the rain came down" and where "the swallows and the sparrows kept flying around shitting on everybody as we rehearsed" (Ouzounian 51) to leaping off a balcony in the dark, for his discomfort and fear, Findley got adventure, meaning, and stories. He was also admitted into a very small group of individuals who could say there were there at the

thrilling beginning of a lasting cultural institution. Like Findley, many (but not all) of the actors in the 2021 pandemic season translated their fear and discomfort into meaning, positive affect, and gratitude for the experience. Some of the actors in this archive even spoke to a renewed sense of ‘why we do theatre’ after losing track of the point during the pandemic.

What I personally have been struggling with, in addition to everything else during those years off was, Is this useful? Is what I've decided to do with my life actually helping anybody? And the answer really felt like, Not so much. And also probably exacerbated by the fact that I was going to be a doctor. When I left high school, I was Bio major for a couple of years and ended up just leaving, out of sadness, among other things. But...this is the first time since...I left in 2011 that I really started to regret not completing my Bachelor of Science because I'm like, Oh, well, even if I was an actor now, we're in the middle of pandemic. I can hop in the lab and try and join the people who are actually doing something to fix this. And instead, I'm over here...talking to myself on camera, sending video tapes of scenes from made-for-TV movies to...who? Are they watching more than 5 seconds when I spend 5 hours trying to put this together? And so...I guess that responsibility was really called to my attention. But from...engaging with putting it on with my teammates. And then with the audience element, I was reminded, Oh, look, this is medicine too. Art is medicine too. Doctors also need to go home and watch Hamilton...Vaccines are not the only balm...I still wrestle with that. (Archive 79)

And:

The pandemic was a time where I really questioned why I chose to be an actor. What does it mean to be an actor? What am I actually putting out into the world? Theatre particularly. Who is interested? Are these stories even impactful? Are

productions even making a difference in people's lives...so the nature of it and the impact and all that. So I was battling with that throughout the whole pandemic up to that point, even through rehearsals, because truthfully, I didn't think I was doing my job as best as I could at that time. Maybe because of all the restrictions. I don't know. It was such a different experience internally that it felt clunky. And then...when we got that first roaring laughter and I saw a gentleman's face just light up ... It was 3 to 5 seconds. I think it lasted maybe 20 seconds for me, and it felt like everything stopped. And I will never forget his face because seeing his face, which went from neutral to this bright light. And I really...said, That's why we do it. And that's when it just became really clear and really moving that something that we're doing, that might feel silly - just impacted another human being at a time where there's so much uncertainty and unknowns and who knows what in that person's life. (Archive 96)

Expressions of gratitude for the Festival and meaning made out of the experience are common to almost all of these actors' testimony; and similar to Timothy Findley's admiration for Tyrone Guthrie, several cast members also express appreciation for artistic director Antoni Cimolino, for leading the Festival through the multi-front crisis of the pandemic. Even as the season required more toughness and devotion from the actors than even Steinbeck might have imagined, they found affective rewards and meaning within the "difficulties and disruptions" ("The Show Must Go On") of the show going on. And if the "enduring power of the Stratford Festival" (Simmons) relies, in many ways, on their unacknowledged physical and emotional labour, the Festival is still a singular experience for actors on the Canadian theatre landscape. The Festival allows actors to work in a repertory system which is a hard-to-come-by, on-your-feet training in performing in a wide range of styles. It provides free coaching to its actors in voice, Alexander technique,

movement, and dialect, along with a range of classes with outside practitioners. A contract with the Festival still carries social capital for actors and gives them the contract-long status of working somewhere people outside of the theatre community recognize by name. And, perhaps most importantly, it gives a large number of actors work and community in a field that can be impoverishing and isolating.

My hope is that this exegesis to my archive offers an example of how the testimony of actors can be used to ethically demonstrate how an actor's individual process is inseparable from the nature, policies, hierarchies, and aims of the theatres that hire them. Also, by using their testimony in dialogue with each other, scholarship, and journalism, that it is possible to gain an inside view of difficult-to-know institutions with savvy publicity teams in a way that both respects and protects actors. Ultimately, by accepting that actors can have agency in both scholarship and institutions, that they can be the best arbiters of the risks and rewards of speaking about their lived, professional experience, my hope has been to demonstrate that even when 'the show must go on' placed them at real risk and removed some of their best tools and techniques, these actors became, as they always do, the show itself.

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