Cutting and Adapting Text for the Virtual Performing Landscape

By Toby Malone and Aili Huber

Cutting is almost inevitable in the process of performing classical texts, for time management; company logistics; sense; structure; or adaptation. Over the last year, as we have written our new book, Cutting Plays for Performance (Routledge, early 2022) we have seen a shift in cutting priorities. When we began, we focused on live physical performance and textual interventions necessary for production concepts and contexts.

What we—along with the rest of the world—did not expect was how much changed under the realities of COVID-19. Like so many from our industry, we viewed this shift as an opportunity rather than an impediment, and as companies pivoted to virtual performance, so too did we consider its impact on how plays are cut.
Cutting the work of a playwright like Shakespeare is complex at the best of times: story, character, and structural intricacies mean haphazard slashing is ill-advised. Cuts are usually necessary for logistical and staging purposes, but traditionally presume the physical presence of bodies as tangible communicators of meaning. A meaningful glance or prop handed from one character to another or shift in body position can carry the storytelling load previously borne by excised lines. Moving a cut to ZOOM or Vimeo expecting the same experience is short-sighted. We must adjust to this new medium.

Major considerations emerge in the process of adaptation to virtual spaces, beginning with the directorial concept. In a virtual *Macbeth*, do actors portray characters who themselves are in a ZOOM call: teleconferencing witches? Do Macbeth and Banquo call in to Duncan’s drop-in room to report the results of their online flamewar? Does Macduff impatiently wait for the Porter to admit him from the ZOOM waiting room? Or do your actors ignore the medium and perform as if they are in a theatre?

Virtual performance adds a complicated, often unwelcome, layer to the dramaturgical mix. Audiences untangle meaning to accept that boxed-in characters speak earnestly into a web-camera, perhaps surrounded by a shimmering, uncanny valley of virtual background. Even as audiences accept this reality, text cuts that assume a physical theatre space miss the medium’s opportunities.
Possibility
Virtual performance offers video and visual design which would require significant outlay in the physical theatre space. As we cut, we should consider whether these new tools can help us tell the story. Can Old Hamlet be superimposed on his son’s video feed, giving the idea of him being literally in the prince’s head? Can we use a texting backchannel to manage asides to the audience? As we explore textual cuts for digital spaces, we need to consider what kinds of information can communicate using the tools of our new “spaces.” Since the beginning of the theatre-closing lockdowns, we have seen examples of textual cuts revolving around smaller casts, focused narratives, and expedient storytelling.

Focus
Virtual performance attracts easily the most distracted theatre audiences of the last two hundred years. The virtual audience is more prone than ever to be multitasking or half-listening. Distractions are no longer the Elizabethan orange-sellers and pickpockets or the see-and-be-seen Restoration posturing. Online performers vie with the accessible lure of the internet, only an idle click away. If a play is too long, too speechy, too unvaried, the safely anonymous device-addicted can happily Facebook throughout an entire performance without disturbing performers or other patrons. Add the actors’ challenge of speechifying without the life-giving energy of an audience and the proximity of other performers, and virtual theatre can be a slog. Expedient cuts that lean toward dialog and minimize soliloquy help maintain audience focus.

Clarity
Clarity remains of paramount importance. Pronoun-heavy text presents a particular problem; tracking antecedents can be nearly impossible. Script edits may go beyond the typical removal of extraneous detail, and shift toward adding extra repetition of character names for clarity.

Physicality
Plays that depend heavily on physical acting present a special challenge. If your cut of Much Ado fails to communicate the idea of eavesdropping, your audience will be confused and much of the best aspects of the play lost entirely. While cutting a line that simply describes action, like “So angle we for Beatrice; who even now / Is couched in the woodbine coverture” is tempting in a cut for physical performance, it is vital in instructing a virtual audience’s imagination.

In any consideration of virtual dramaturgy, the temptation is to linger on what is lost—the liminal space, the sacred compact between actors and audiences breathing the same air, the thrilling liveness of the event—but there are opportunities too. A virtual cut removes the onus from the corporeal presence and brings focus back to the verbal storytelling, in a manner aligned to radio drama. Experimentation reveals the possibilities in virtual text cuts. Stripping away elements unnecessary to the virtual space foregrounds the medium and presents new opportunities. It’s one that we relish.