
Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



**Cimolino, Antoni, artistic dir.; Anita Gaffney, executive dir.;
Ann Swerdfager, publicity dir. Stratfest@Home. Other**

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Volume 44, numéro 2, printemps 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1082710ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i2.37537>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Carson, C. (2021). Compte rendu de [Cimolino, Antoni, artistic dir.; Anita Gaffney, executive dir.; Ann Swerdfager, publicity dir. Stratfest@Home. Other]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 44(2), 223–228. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i2.37537>

collections, for not being even more comprehensive. Perhaps it will spur on others in different languages and cultures to create something of their own. Nevertheless, it is certainly disappointing that many highly talented artists of colour, some of whom undoubtedly have interesting and different perspectives to offer, and who have been working at the highest levels in the British or American theatre, are not interviewed. Of course, no outsider can know how hard they may have tried to get different interviewees to take part, but if the project were to continue and expand, these two areas would be welcome additions.

The Globe Player is an extraordinary resource for researchers and enthusiasts. It offers the Shakespeare aficionado a cornucopia of material that leaves most other digital resources in the shade. The productions of the main company, good though some of them are, are probably a slightly less interesting aspect of the site. What is gratifying is that the truly unique and valuable assets are all available for free.

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<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i2.37536>

Cimolino, Antoni, artistic dir.; Anita Gaffney, executive dir.; Ann Swerdfager, publicity dir.

Stratfest@Home. Other.

Stratford: Stratford Festival, 2020. Accessed 23 November 2020.

stratfordfestival.ca/AtHome.

The response of the international theatre community to the pandemic restrictions was initially a generous one. Large institutional theatres all over the world suddenly made recorded versions of their performances available online, for the most part for free. But as the crisis has evolved, so has the online provision by established theatres. As a long-time advocate of using digital performance resources in teaching and research, my response to the rapid rewriting of the online world in this area includes feelings of both excitement and frustration. Had it not been for the pandemic, I imagine that many of these online initiatives would have developed over the next five to ten years. However,

being thrust into radical change can create sites that are not conceptualized coherently.

I would like to document the shifting nature of Stratfest@Home over the past few months to highlight the transfer I have witnessed from an open celebratory moment when the global artistic community was seen to be working together to create an inclusive reaction to a terrible situation, to an individual response of a theatre company now reassessing its future without live audiences. The site, as it currently exists, presents a hub for digital resources related to the Stratford Festival that are available to users on a subscription basis. This stands in contrast to the original site set up in the spring and summer of 2020 to broadcast recordings of recent productions. The speed of change this site has demonstrated is instructive given that many other theatres may follow suit. Like universities, what began as a quick reaction to an emergency is rapidly becoming the new normal for the distribution of online resources for the study of Shakespeare.

The first online performance I watched from Stratfest@Home in May 2020 was the film adaptation of Robert Lepage's *Coriolanus*—a performance that I watched live in Stratford in 2018—which had been transformed for cinema presentation the following year. Being able to see the filmed version provided me with an opportunity to review this performance as part of the Lockdown Shakespeare edition of *Shakespeare Bulletin*. Reflecting on my position, as an established follower of both the Stratford Festival and Lepage's directorial career, provided a great deal of context for the show I saw on my computer in the summer of 2020. But this deep engagement with the production and its history made me wonder how the production would be received by audiences with no knowledge of the Festival's work. The interviews that accompanied the performance were useful in setting the scene and describing the process of creation of this production, which differed quite significantly from other Stratford performances. For a new audience member, the ability to have access to several productions throughout the summer, plus interviews with the cast and crew, provided an experience that was quite similar to attending the entirety of a season, an experience that was once reserved for the wealthy theatre goer.

This increase in access to full performances, as well as the ability to watch a number of productions by the same theatre company, seeing actors take on more than one role, has the potential to challenge the position of the elite theatre audience member (or academic researcher). Living in Stratford-upon-Avon

in the UK, I am accustomed to being surrounded by people who can boast about seeing numerous *Hamlet* or *Romeo and Juliet* productions from different periods of the Royal Shakespeare Company's (RSC) history. But increasingly, in my teaching, I have been struck by the fact that students are coming to the university with the experience of having been able to compare productions online. Resources like Digital Theatre+ (digitaltheatreplus.com) and Drama Online (dramaonlinelibrary.com, reviewed in this issue) have made this kind of comparison in the classroom possible. In fact, ten productions from the Stratford Festival are now available through Digital Theatre+, allowing for a comparison with productions from the RSC and Shakespeare's Globe. Given this availability of the productions online, what is the advantage of having a resource that is dedicated entirely to the work of the Stratford Festival? The ability to curate resources in a way that highlights the history of this Festival's approach to Shakespeare in performance, with its unique thrust stage, is one decided advantage. However, the difference between archiving the past and creating a marketing tool for the Festival is not entirely clear. Taking a closer look at the content currently available reveals a strong element of both impulses.

The heart of the current site is the Stratford Festival on Film series. Like the RSC and the Globe, Antoni Cimolino as artistic director undertook some years ago the task of recording the entire canon on film (each production can be purchased as an individual film for download or on DVD). The first iteration of the Stratfest@Home website made twelve productions available for free, one each week for twelve weeks. The context of the first wave of the pandemic created a focus on productions of *Coriolanus*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, to illustrate how Shakespeare's work can help to address times of crisis. Extensive resources were created to support the Thursday "Viewing Parties," including information about the set and costume design, as well as other elements of the production process (these resources reappear as part of the subscription service under a heading "Making a Season"). In terms of recreating the experience of attending the plays live in Stratford, the subscription site does a good job of making available activities that are regular fixtures in the Festival calendar. "Panel discussions," "Creative Concepts," "Conversations," and "In Good Company" are headings on the site under which it is possible to hear from a wide range of contributors, from Margaret Atwood describing her adaptation of *The Tempest* (*Hag-seed*), to Camille Paglia discussing "The Women of Shakespeare." These events, which are usually scattered across the season, are drawn together here into a

concentrated burst of engaging debate in a way that provides an impressive record of the work of the Festival.

In terms of the history of the work that this established theatre has created, there are two key sections on the site. The first is “Legacy Films,” which brings together older shows that have been captured on film. These productions were the focus of the “Live Watch Parties” in the autumn of 2020. But where the earlier broadcasts of more recent productions were available beyond the date of transmission for three weeks, these older shows were made freely available for only thirty-six hours after the initial broadcast. To accompany these older productions and to flesh out the history of the Festival, there is a section entitled “Documentaries”; two of these, about the origins of the stage and its use, are freely available. For the theatre historian, there is quite a bit to enjoy, but for the lecturer or teacher, trying to prepare a class on one of the plays made available, there seems less to offer (although it must be acknowledged that the Stratford Festival site has a series of excellent study guides online for teachers). The inclusion of “Stratford Festival Ghost Tours,” “The Days of Confinement Podcasts,” and episodes of the satiric *Leer Estates* shows that the site is trying to broaden the appeal of the Festival to a range of audiences, a bit more like a broadcast channel, but these resources also manage to dilute the content and distract anyone who wants to focus on the Shakespeare productions.

To conclude this review, I would like to concentrate on three separate viewing experiences I had which make clear to me the key focus of this enterprise. The first is the already mentioned experience of watching *Coriolanus* on my tablet in the UK two years after watching it in the theatre. The availability of this production online allowed me to engage with British colleagues in a discussion of this director’s work, something that I had tried to do in the past without success given how difficult and expensive it has become to find and attend Lepage’s work. My review of this production influenced the review of Peter Kirwan, something Kirwan acknowledges on his Bardathon site.¹ Watching this production again also inspired me to tackle a longer critical piece on Lepage’s engagement with Shakespeare’s work.² The second production I viewed from the initial offerings was *King Lear*, starring Colm Feore in the title

1. Peter Kirwan, “*Coriolanus* (Stratford Festival) @ Stratfest@Home (webcast),” *The Bardathon*, 20 May 2020, blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/bardathon/2020/05/20/coriolanus-stratford-festival-stratfeshome-webcast/.

2. Christie Carson, *Robert Lepage’s Intercultural Encounters* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), doi.org/10.1017/9781108938730.

role. As someone who has attended the Festival for decades, it was strange to see the mercurial Feore take on the aging king. However, knowing of Feore's long history with the Festival gave this performance additional poignance. The Stratford Festival, unlike the RSC or the Globe, is a company that employs its central actors for a very long time. It also aims to nurture new generations of actors—something the site points out with a section entitled “And Introducing” that features interviews with young theatre artists.

Cimolino, in the press release for the new subscription site, points out that the second iteration of Stratfest@Home has been created with a more realistic approach to the ongoing crisis in mind. Given that the Festival receives 5 percent of its budget from government sources and 70 percent of its revenue from ticket sales, it is not surprising that the Company is looking to new ways to generate income. The theme of the Watch Party series, which launched on 22 October 2020, was “Hope without Hope,” a sombre recognition of the plight of many theatre artists. Cimolino says, “At this particular moment of pandemic, with social isolation once more upon us, nights growing longer and winter approaching, we need the consolation of community like never before. With these viewing parties and the many related artistic programs in Stratfest@Home, we invite you to enter the warmth of the Festival bubble.”³ The very real challenges of a Canadian winter spent without income resonate in the words of the artistic director.

The rapid shift in the site from celebratory to pragmatic is surprising, but as an example of what can be achieved online in a remarkably short time, this site might be seen to be a bit of a trailblazer. Cimolino says, “We as artists are being asked not only to find new ways to connect with audiences but also to create more engaging ways to use digital media.” Executive director Anita Gaffney points out, “The pandemic has accelerated our digital media competency. Our artists and staff have created some really interesting, fresh, new content, which sits beautifully alongside the full-length films and legacy content.”⁴ In addition to the broadcast of historic productions from the Festival, the new site has an ambitious plan for ongoing development. Along with two new Stratford on Film productions in the coming months, there will be additional legacy productions

3. “Stratford Festival Launches *Stratfest@Home*, a New Digital Subscription Series,” Stratford Festival, media release, October 2020, stratfordfestival.ca/Media/NewsReleases/2020-10-19/Stratfest-At-Home.

4. “Stratford Festival Launches *Stratfest@Home*.”

released as rights are obtained. Three new initiatives are also proposed: a series of nine cabarets, shot on the iconic main stage, called “Up Close and Musical,” a game show of sorts called “Undiscovered Sonnets,” and “Viral Transmissions,” a series of new conversations with theatre creators (a selection of these is already available on the site). In fact, the new site is trying to do so many things at once that the only real criticism I have is that it may be trying to do too much. There is a slight sense of panic in the air which the “Hope against Hope” theme underlines.

The final “Live Watch Party” I attended, on 12 November 2020, was a broadcast of the 1992 production of *Romeo and Juliet* that featured the artistic director Cimolino as Romeo and Canada’s sweetheart Megan Follows (best known for her portrayal as Anne of Green Gables on television) as Juliet. Also featured in this production was Colm Feore as Mercutio. This Legacy production was directed by Richard Monette (an artistic director of the Festival prior to Cimolino) and was filmed by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. It is hard to imagine a production more steeped in mainstream Canadian culture. To accompany this party was a live interview with Cimolino and Follows, who were joined by two actors who had recently played the roles, Sara Farb and Antoine Yared. Naturally, the production starring Farb and Yared is also available on the site. For every production available it is possible to download the house program from the site, again giving a sense of entering the Festival archives, or in the case of longstanding audience members, their own archives of past performances attended. In watching this production, I felt the vision of the Festival presented through Stratfest@Home was one of nostalgic reassurance. While the initial site placed the theatre alongside the National Theatre, the RSC, and the Globe, which were all making productions available simultaneously, this second version of the site revels in past glories while looking with caution towards futures unknown.

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<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i2.37537>