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## “Hopeful feeling[s]:” Utopian Shakespeares and the 2021 Reopening of British Theatres

**Abstract:** This article focuses on a specific moment in recent British theatre history: the late spring of 2021 when theatres reopened after a prolonged period of closure that had been enforced during the first waves of the Coronavirus pandemic. It considers The HandleBards’ production of *Romeo and Juliet* (performed at York’s Theatre Royal) and Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre’s production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in the context of that unusual time. The productions, which both used bright colours and irreverent approaches to create festive atmospheres, had a shared joyful aesthetic which encouraged me to think more deeply about what audiences wanted—and needed—from post-lockdown theatre. In this article, I suggest that these vibrant Shakespeares, when presented in the immediate aftermath of the first waves of Covid, functioned as cathartic utopian performatives. They offered audiences uncomplicated joy and “a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like” after Coronavirus (Dolan 2005, p. 5). They “let audiences experience a processual, momentary feeling of affinity” and encouraged them to “imagine, together, the affective potential of a future in which this rich feeling of warmth, even of love, could be experienced regularly and effectively outside the theatre” (Dolan, p. 14). Utopian performatives are characterised by their transience and, inevitably, the simple joy of these Shakespeares was fleeting. Both venues have since hosted visually and thematically darker productions that have used Shakespeare to explore important social and political issues. Indeed, the HandleBards’ *Romeo and Juliet* and The Globe’s *Midsummer* are productions which might, in other circumstances, have been dismissed as simplistic. However, I suggest that these productions offered real hope for the future in the wake of crisis and demonstrate the importance of theatre in challenging times.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare and covid, Shakespeare and crisis, Shakespeare in performance.

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This article focuses on a particular moment in recent British theatre history: the late spring and early summer of 2021 when, after an extended period of closure brought about by the first waves of the Coronavirus pandemic, theatres tentatively began to reopen. I reflect on that moment from the vantage point of summer 2022, when going to the theatre felt almost normal once again. I am reluctant to call this the *post*-pandemic moment because the virus is still with us but, thanks to vaccination programmes and increasing immunity, a trip to see a play no longer feels as dangerous as it did just twelve months ago. Looking back on a production of *Romeo and Juliet* by The HandleBards and a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Shakespeare's Globe Theatre that I saw in that strange time, I explore the "moments of utopia" (Dolan, *Utopia* 8) that I found. I suggest that in the immediate aftermath of the height of the pandemic these joyful productions offered audiences "hopeful feeling[s] of what the world might be like" (Dolan, *Utopia* 5) after Coronavirus.

Jill Dolan's "inquiry into the ways in which performance might provide us with experiences of utopia" ("Performance" 455) was initially inspired by—and developed in response to—radical theatre in fringe venues made for and by people from under-served and underrepresented communities. In late 2000, Dolan collaborated with Rude Mechs (a theatre company based in Austin, Texas who were "determined to do local outreach into the Latino/a community") on a "performance series" titled "Throws Like a Girl: A Femme, A Butch, A Jew," which showcased "irreverent lesbian and feminist performance" ("Performance" 462, 464).<sup>1</sup> It was this series which served as the foundation for her theory of the "utopian performative" ("Performance" 460). Since the theory has its roots in "edgy, 'avant-garde,' 'non-mainstream' work" ("Performance" 462) such as "Throws Like A Girl..." it may seem inappropriate to apply it to productions of plays by Shakespeare, who is perhaps the Western world's most mainstream writer. The application of Dolan's theory becomes even more questionable when those productions of Shakespeare's plays are performed on mainstream stages like York's Theatre Royal (a large regional producing theatre in the north of England) and Shakespeare's Globe Theatre (a replica early modern playhouse nestled on London's South Bank). What's more, the two productions I wish to focus on here were far from "edgy" or "avant-garde". However, in the book that grew out of her first article on utopia at the theatre Dolan noted that "utopia can

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<sup>1</sup> In *Utopia* Dolan states that "the 'Throws Like a Girl' series of women's solo performance" had its "first instalment in fall 2001" when "the Rude Mechs and I brought Holly Hughes, Peggy Shaw, and Deb Margolin to Austin to perform" (24). The date in Dolan's earlier article appears to be correct: Rude Mechs' website retains an archived listing for the "provocative performance festival" celebrating "the contributions of original female theatre artists to our cultural landscape" from 2000 ('Throws Like a Girl 2000').

be grasped in performance in any location” (*Utopia* 5), revealing her own “eclectic tastes” (16) and refusing to “parse distinctions between ‘mainstream’ and ‘alternative’ or ‘community-based’ and ‘popular’ performance” (17). I think Dolan would agree, then, that it was possible to find “moments of utopia” in the joyously silly Shakespeares I discuss in this article. I will suggest that while not as political or as radical as the performances that made up the first “Throws Like A Girl...” series, The HandleBards’ *Romeo and Juliet* and The Globe’s *Midsummer* were utopian. They “let audiences experience a processual, momentary feeling of affinity” and encouraged them to “imagine, together, the affective potential of a future in which this rich feeling of warmth, even of love, could be experienced regularly and effectively outside the theatre” (Dolan, *Utopia* 14).

Furthermore, Dolan’s theory is particularly useful as a lens through which to understand the potential social and political impacts of performance in times of crisis. Dolan first wrote about utopian performatives in the context of various “social scourges” including

Poverty, famine, cancer, AIDS, inadequate health care, racial and gender discrimination, hatred of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered people, the grossly unequal distribution of wealth and resources globally, religious intolerance, xenophobia expressed in anti-immigrant legislation, lack of access for the disabled, pay inequality, and of course a host of others (“Performance” 456-7).

She suggested that moments of utopia glimpsed through performance offered audiences hope that these issues “might be ameliorated” (“Performance” 457). While unlikely to be achieved “in our lifetimes,” Dolan’s conviction was that a “better future can be articulated and even embodied, however fleetingly”, at the theatre (“Performance” 457). Dolan went on to expand her “set of beliefs in the possibility of a better future [...] that can be captured and claimed in performance” in “the long moment after [the] September 11” terror attacks, when “new definitions of citizenship” rooted in nationalism, racism, and fascism emerged (*Utopia* 3). These conditions prompted her to ask: “How can we hope for a better future in such an environment? What can hope mean, in a world of terror? What can performance *do*, politically, against these overwhelming odds?” (*Utopia* 3, emphasis in original). Dolan’s hopeful search for moments of utopia in the theatre has offered me a way to think about theatre in a different moment of crisis, the aftermath of the Coronavirus pandemic; to contemplate the “hopeful feeling[s]” that two productions staged in this moment of intense fear and uncertainty prompted for me; and to ask whether these feelings might be leveraged to work towards a better world.

## York Theatre Royal, 26 May 2021

Let me begin with an attempt to evoke the feeling of stepping into a theatre for the first time after a prolonged absence, since to find utopia in the theatre we must begin by “pay[ing] attention to what we *feel*” (*Utopia* 34, emphasis in original). Before the pandemic I was a devoted theatre attendee, watching at least one play a week, and while there was plenty of performance to enjoy online when Coronavirus closed live performance venues, I was suffering from Zoom fatigue by the end of 2020.<sup>2</sup> What’s more, I missed the inimitable *buzz* of a trip to the theatre, that ineffable thing that Dolan might, to Philip Auslander’s disgust, call “the *magic* of theatre” (“Performance” 458, my emphasis).<sup>3</sup> I was excited to return to live, in-person performance and booked tickets to a show at my local theatre as soon as its reopening season was announced. However, when the much longed-for day finally came my excitement soon morphed into anxiety.

On 26 May 2021 I headed to York’s Theatre Royal for a matinee performance of *Romeo and Juliet* by The HandleBards, an environmentally-conscious travelling troupe who cycle between tour venues, performing their accessible, family-friendly adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays across the UK (and beyond). I had chosen the matinee deliberately since I hoped it might attract an older—and thus safer—crowd who were more likely to have stuck to the government guidelines during the lockdowns and more likely to have had their first Covid vaccinations. As I queued outside the venue I gulped down fresh air, trying not to worry too much about the fact that, in just a few short minutes, I would be indoors and sharing air with a group of strangers, something I had not done in over a year. I reached the front of the queue and showed my e-ticket to a steward. After the ticket and my confirmation of a recent negative lateral flow test had been scrutinised, and my temperature had been checked by another steward brandishing a handheld device, I was granted entry to the theatre building. In another time I might have headed to the bar for a drink or found a comfortable corner of the foyer to settle in, but theatregoing was different in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic closures. I was pointed, gently but firmly, towards the stalls and ushered to my seat. Other audience members seemed relaxed, but my anxiety refused to fade. I tugged at my face mask, checking that the edges felt secure enough against my skin, already feeling hot

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<sup>2</sup> For accounts of the diversity and vibrancy of lockdown Shakespeare see: Aebischer; Allred, Broadribb and Sullivan; Kirwan and Sullivan; and Smith, Valls-Russell and Yabut.

<sup>3</sup> As Dolan notes: “in his [1999] book, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, [Auslander] explicitly critiques as sentimental the notion that performance remains the domain of the live, that intimacy and immediacy are possible there in ways unavailable in other media, such as film or television” (“Performance” 458).

and uncomfortable as the stiff clip pinched my nose and my breath got trapped by the flimsy layers of material that I hoped would keep me safe. There was not yet any hope to be found at the theatre. In fact, my primary emotion was fear.

While waiting for the performance to begin I pondered The HandleBards’ decision to tour *Romeo and Juliet* at this particular moment. Shakespeare’s tragedy is heavy with plague imagery: as Rebecca Totaro notes, the play includes Mercutio’s curse “A plague o’ both houses!” (*Romeo and Juliet* 3:1:88), “one of the most memorable literary lines from plague-time England” (1).<sup>4</sup> *Romeo and Juliet* is also a rare example of an early modern play which represents plague as a “literal disease” rather than a metaphor (Totaro 22).<sup>5</sup> So why *Romeo and Juliet*? Surely a comedy would have been a better way to celebrate the reopening of the theatres? Surely a production of Shakespeare’s most plague-ridden play would only serve to draw attention to the devastating modern plague we were all so desperate to forget? Perhaps, I mused, the pandemic context would offer us new ways of understanding Shakespeare’s tragedy. After all, Totaro observes that Friar John’s quarantine in Mantua, during which he is “[s]ealed up” in a house where it was (wrongly) suspected that “the infectious pestilence did reign” (5:2:11, 10) “often goes unexamined” by modern “audiences and scholars”, though “Shakespeare’s original audiences” would have “understood all too well that when the plague visited, all metaphorical houses were shaken at their foundations” (1). Those of us who gathered at the York Theatre Royal after our own periods of quarantine several centuries later brought similar understandings with us.

I doubt I was the only audience member, then, who was relieved that The HandleBards avoided easy parallels between the early modern plague and the contemporary Coronavirus in their adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. Instead, the three-strong company (Tom Dixon, Lucy Green and Paul Moss) focused on the simple joys of singing together, laughing together and being in a theatre together after a year in which those things had been impossible (and, at times, illegal). Shakespeare’s play may, in Paula S. Berggren’s words, “explicitly [...] dramatize the profound impression that isolating the sick [...] made on the English populace” (150) but The HandleBards wished to acknowledge the pandemic only briefly. By adding a visual hand sanitiser gag to the thumb-biting exchange that opens Act 1, Scene 1, the company took an early opportunity to acknowledge the pandemic context and to encourage their audience to laugh at it. And laugh we did. This playful opening moment set the tone for the production and my nervousness began to ebb away.

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<sup>4</sup> All references to Shakespeare’s plays are taken from Greenblatt et al.

<sup>5</sup> From a survey of the early modern English dramatic corpus Totaro finds that “only Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist*, and John Fletcher’s *The Tamer Tamed* offer extended representations of the plague” (22).

From their simple, festive, rainbow-toned set to the ukulele interludes that were deployed when proceedings threatened to get “a bit heavy,” The HandleBards welcomed their audience back to indoor, in-person theatre with unrestrained delight. Dixon, Green and Moss made their *Romeo and Juliet* while “cooped up together during lockdown,” creating “an unhinged and bonkers, laugh-out-loud” production “[f]uelled by cabin fever” and their “bookshelf full of Shakespeare” (The HandleBards). They invited audiences to “[f]orget the tears and tragedy” and instead “get ready for... Shakespeare as you’ve never seen it before,” with “music, mayhem and more costume changes than you can shake a spear at” (The HandleBards).

Their riotous production was a somewhat loose adaptation of Shakespeare’s play which centred on the hormonal lust of its teenage protagonists. The immature pair seemed happiest when noisily making out: at one point, Juliet (Green) swept Romeo (Moss) off his feet into a particularly passionate clinch (Figure 1, below). This proud display of saliva-swapping was both funny and heart-warming, especially in the context of the pandemic when would-be lovers had been advised to keep dates socially distanced. Green and Moss brought a chaotic, childish energy to Shakespeare’s lines, too. For example, Juliet (Green) was visibly proud of her witticisms in the “balcony” scene (Act 2, Scene 1), pulling self-satisfied faces after clever lines. Unable to control her emotions, however, she growled “I come!” to the Nurse who interrupted the exchange by calling her from off stage, before turning back to Romeo and giggling sweetly. The HandleBards’ *Romeo and Juliet* also featured plenty of digressions from the text. One particularly crowd-pleasing addition was appended to Juliet’s trip to Friar Laurence’s cell (Act 4, Scene 1) where, before obtaining the vial of liquid that would help her assume the “borrowed likeness of shrunk death” (4:1:104) and thus avoid marrying Paris, she first had to get through the door. This involved an elaborate mime sequence. First, Friar Laurence (Dixon) mimed unbolting an unnecessarily high-security door and entered the cell before ushering Juliet (Green) inside. Next, Green repeated the mime to “lock” the “door,” copying Dixon’s hand movements and sound effects. Friar John (Moss) then strode on stage from behind the curtain where the small cast did their quick changes and walked straight into the cell, much to the horror of Dixon and Green and to the delight of their audience. He was instructed to try again and, on his second attempt to join the scene, remembered to mime the comically complicated locking mechanism. Much of the comedy in the production centred around these Friars, who carried spray bottles of holy water to dampen the teenage passions of the titular lovers and even had their own “Ninja Friars” theme tune that they frequently sung while adopting martial arts poses. But the comedy was by no means limited to them: when Juliet tasted the “distilling liquor” (4:1:94) a few scenes later, she declared that it tasted “like strawberry” before vomiting violently and collapsing in a heap. In Shakespeare’s



Figure 1: Young love—Lucy Green and Paul Moss in a promotional image for The HandleBards’ 2021 touring production of *Romeo and Juliet*, dir. Nel Crouch  
Photo by Rah Petherbridge, courtesy of The HandleBards

play “[d]eath lies on” Juliet gracefully “like an untimely frost / Upon the sweetest flower of all the field” (4:4:55-56); in The HandleBards’ version of *Romeo and Juliet*, death-like life—was both funny and grotesque, and ripe for comic exploitation.

By the time the real, lasting, tragic deaths rolled around at the end of the play, the audience were conditioned to respond with amusement rather than sadness, howling with laughter as Romeo (Moss) died slowly and melodramatically and again when Juliet (Green) pulled handful after handful of

ribbons representing blood and guts from beneath her costume (Figure 2, below). This low-tech production, with its slapstick style and irreverent approach to adaptation, might seem like an unlikely place to find meaningful utopia but as I emerged from York's Theatre Royal into the soft sunshine of that late May afternoon I was full of "hopeful feeling[s]". I felt grateful to have experienced The HandleBards' celebration of love after a time in which many couples and families had been separated. I also found hope in the fact that I could share this silly Shakespeare with a group of strangers. After a period of intense isolation, it felt joyous to be in a darkened room watching theatre with others once again. As Dolan points out, there are many reasons why "people come together to watch other people labor on stage", including "fashion", "taste" and a desire "to collect [...] cultural capital" ("Performance" 455). However, I suspect that in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic theatre closures the "less tangible, more emotional, spiritual, or communitarian reasons" for seeking out live performance were key drivers of our return to auditoria across the world. I can, of course, only speak from personal experience, but I was certainly propelled back to the theatre by a desire to "gather with others, to see people perform live, hoping, perhaps, for moments of transformation that might let [me] reconsider and change the world outside the theatre, from its macro to its micro arrangements." (Dolan, "Performance" 455).



Figure 2: Lucy Green as Juliet and Paul Moss as Romeo in The HandleBards' *Romeo and Juliet* (2021 tour, Coventry Cathedral performance), dir. Nel Crouch  
Photo by Garry Jones, courtesy of The HandleBards



Throughout 2020, and for the first months of 2021, I had desperately avoided coming into contact with the wider world for fear of contracting a potentially deadly disease. Yet it was in the very act of gathering in a room with others that I found hope. Dolan draws on the work of anthropologist Victor Turner, whose “notion of ‘communitas’ in social drama [...] very much describes what” Dolan calls “utopian performativity in performance” (“Performance” 473). Through Turner, Dolan charts “the social potential of utopian performatives” which “let audiences experience a processual, momentary feeling of affinity, in which spectators experience themselves as part of a congenial public constituted by the performance’s address” (*Utopia* 14). Dolan suggests that, when “[h]ailed by these performatives,” audiences can be rallied to hope for the possibility of realizing improved social relations” and “can imagine, together, the affective potential of a future in which this rich feeling of warmth, even of love, could be experienced regularly and effectively outside the theater” (*Utopia* 14). In that dark auditorium I felt community—and perhaps even the “magical [...] flash of lucid mutual understanding” (Turner, quoted in “Performance” 473) that is communitas—which encouraged me to look forward to the easing of restrictions and increased socialisation with hope rather than fear. The HandleBards’ *Romeo and Juliet* reminded me that it was not only possible but truly joyous to be around strangers. During their performance I experienced a utopian performative that enabled me to release myself “from the inhibiting restraints of the ‘as is’ for the more liberatory possibilities of the ‘what if’,” relinquishing myself to the “common human need to hope” (Dolan, *Utopia* 21) after a time of such despair. I returned home with sides sore from laughing and a renewed hope for our shared future.

### **Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, London, 5 June 2021**

Just ten days after watching *Romeo and Juliet* at York’s Theatre Royal I experienced more joyful post-pandemic performance in the form of the Globe’s production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, though this time I felt the magic of in-person theatre vicariously. Watching from afar via live stream, I was heartened to see the wooden O full of people once again, albeit in socially distanced household bubbles. I wondered if the audience gathered in the reconstructed open-air playhouse felt twinges of communitas like I had in York. Perhaps, given the space’s shared light, they felt part of a community even more strongly than I had. I wondered, too, if any people among the waiting crowd were as scared as I had been before The HandleBards’ *Romeo and Juliet* had begun. My thoughts were interrupted when the Globe’s production opened with a loud blast of Mexican-inflected brass band music and exploded into a high-energy production. Like *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* had

potential contemporary relevancies in the early summer of 2021: as critic Chris Wiegand noted in his review of the production, the play “chime[d] with lockdown nightmares of confinement and separated lovers,” the “discombobulation of a world turned upside down,” and “climate chaos” (Wiegand). However, rather than dwelling on these parallels the Globe opted to “[throw] a party instead” (Wiegand), reopening the theatre with uncomplicated festivity, much as The Handlebards had done at York’s Theatre Royal.

It was not only the approach to adaptation and the tone that felt familiar, however: I was also struck by Jean Chan’s set design for the production, which bore some similarities to the HandleBards’ for *Romeo and Juliet*. Both productions used bright streamers and colourful bunting to create festive atmospheres and this shared aesthetic of joy encouraged me to think more deeply about what audiences wanted—and needed—from post-lockdown theatre. The Globe’s production was originally staged in 2019 and was directed by Sean Holmes for “Playing Shakespeare with Deutsche Bank,” the theatre’s “flagship project for secondary and post-16 further education students” (Shakespeare’s Globe, “Playing”), which specialises in accessible productions “designed to appeal to young people” (Rokison 6).<sup>6</sup> The decision to reopen with a re-cast revival of this production was interesting because it revealed what “the Globe believed we all needed” (Stephenson 710) in that moment: a light comedy with bright colours, broad appeal, and opportunities for audience participation.

Opting for a comedy was an understandable choice since, after so much real-life tragedy, light relief was in order. Joseph F. Stephenson observes that “[m]ost [British] companies chose to err on the safe side with their reopening repertoire”, with “light comedies” dominating listings “during the summer of 2021” (709) and the Touchstone database of Shakespeare in Performance in 2021, held by the University of Birmingham’s Shakespeare Institute, supports this observation.<sup>7</sup> Comedies represented over half of the total number of Shakespearean productions in the UK in 2021. Of these, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was the most popular, with a total of ten productions recorded in the Touchstone database.<sup>8</sup> Yet, in its original form, the play was not quite light enough for the Globe’s reopening “party.” As Wiegand notes, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* has “troubling aspects”, but these were played down in the

<sup>6</sup> For a critical evaluation of this initiative see Yandell, Coles and Bryer.

<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to Kate Welch, Senior Library Assistant at the Shakespeare Institute Library, for providing this information. Thanks also to Robert Iles, who generously shared 2021 data from the Internet UK Theatre Database (iUKTDb; <https://www.uktw.co.uk/archive/>).

<sup>8</sup> Due to the ongoing Covid-related disruption to performance in 2021, there may be some discrepancy between the number of productions planned (and thus recorded in the database) and the number of productions which took place, but this information is correct to the best of my knowledge.

Globe’s adaptation in favour of playfulness and the creation of “a fun night” for returning theatregoers (Wiegand). Whether the darker elements were cut to make the play more accessible to young audiences or, as Stephenson suggests, “to meet its COVID-tempered run time of 140 minutes with no interval” (712) is immaterial, though: the effect was a thoroughly comedic production “that answer[ed] Theseus’s request, in Act V, to ‘ease the anguish of a torturing hour’ and prefer[red] to see mischief not cruelty, light not darkness” (Wiegand).



Figure 3: Victoria Elliott as Titania and Sophie Russell as Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, dir. Sean Holmes (Shakespeare’s Globe, 2021)  
Photo by Tristram Kenton, courtesy of Shakespeare’s Globe

If choosing a comedy and making it lighter were obvious choices for the post-lockdown moment, the Globe’s reasons to revive an existing production were less clear. Cutting costs might have been one motivation for remounting a production “that had already been tested, with mostly satisfactory results, in 2019” (Stephenson 709), especially as the Globe had made no secret of its financial difficulty during the first year of the pandemic.<sup>9</sup> The production may also have been revived because it suited the post-lockdown mood perfectly, as

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<sup>9</sup> Artistic Director Michelle Terry’s May 2020 warning that the theatre might not survive the pandemic unless donations were received to secure its future raised international alarm (see Jefferey).

a comparison of reviews reveals. When Holmes' *Midsummer* was first performed in 2019 Kate Wyver, a theatre critic for *The Guardian*, described the "joyful explosion of vivid chaos" (Shakespeare's Globe, "A Midsummer") as "over-excited" (Wyver). However, the production's bright colours and chaotic energy (Figure 3, above) met the demands of a post-lockdown celebration: Alice Saville praised its revival as "one big 'welcome back' party" in her illustrated review for the online theatre magazine *Exeunt* (Saville).

Weigand suggests that Holmes' *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was never permitted to "do more than amuse" (Wiegand). However, it was in this very amusement that I caught glimpses of utopia—a future where joy is treasured, and people come together to share it—just as I had while watching The HandleBards' *Romeo and Juliet*. This joy was so palpable that even I, a remote audience member watching on a screen and listening through tinny speakers, could feel it. Closing my laptop's lid at the end of the show, I began to think deeper about what these two productions offered. Beyond ecstatic celebration of the return to live, in-person performance, the productions modelled specific visions for a better world. I suggest that their shared visions were tripartite, with both productions encouraging audience members to do three things: be yourself, do it yourself (DIY), and share joy with others.

### **Be Yourself: "Utopic Romanticism" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet***

In her review of the 2019 production of the Globe's *Midsummer* Wyver declared that "this production belongs to the lovers" and found "[t]he ricocheting relationships between the quartet [...] a pleasure to watch" (Wyver). In my opinion, the production (or its revival, at least) belonged to the mechanicals, the group of artisans-cum-amateur-actors who perform the comedy's closing play-within-a-play. Productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* staged at the Globe have not always celebrated these characters. Emma Rice's otherwise brilliant 2016 production, for example, portrayed them as overzealous Globe ushers and treated them in a way that felt (to me) quite patronising. In Holmes' *Midsummer*, however, the mechanicals were allowed to shine, and their passionate amateurism was celebrated. All the mechanicals but Peter Quince (Nadine Higgin) arrived onstage for their rehearsal scene (Act 1, Scene 2) from the Yard, which immediately endeared them to the audience. Rokison suggests that "the use of the yard for elements of the action, most notably actors' entrances and exits, has been characteristic of numerous productions at Shakespeare's Globe" but seems particularly prolific in its "Playing Shakespeare..." productions, where "the entire auditorium" has often been used to ensure "that young

audiences were consistently surrounded by the action,” to “[open] up the action beyond the stage”, and to “[implicate] and [involve] the audience in the world of the play” (20). In Holmes’ *Midsummer*, this technique had the additional effect of making the mechanicals feel relatable and even part of the temporary community of the audience (a belonging that was compounded when they selected a spectator to stand in for Robin Starveling the tailor). Another element of relatability was added by the costume design. In stark contrast to the “quartet” of lovers, who were dressed in high-fashion, monochrome reimaginings of Elizabethan attire, the mechanicals wore recognisable modern street clothes that expressed their personalities. Their performance of “Pyramus and Thisbe” was pitched comically, with the mechanicals over-acting, over-projecting, and generally making fools of themselves. However, the audience were always laughing with rather than at the mechanicals, who were celebrated for being unashamedly themselves. The production’s celebration of the mechanicals, in all their imperfect glory, is an example of what Dolan calls “utopic romanticism” which she says (quoting Richard Dyer), can “[give] us a glimpse of what it means to live at the height of our emotional and our experiential capacities—not dragged down by the banality of organized routine life” (Dyer, quoted in Dolan “Performance” 472).

Utopic romanticism could be found elsewhere in the Globe’s *Midsummer*, too: in its portrayal of the brief, drug-induced same-sex romance between Bottom (Sophie Russell) and Titania (Victoria Elliott). In the giddiness of Sophie Russell’s Bottom, who, as Wiegand notes, “almost floats with woozy love for Titania” (Wiegand), the audience saw another model of emotional intensity (Figure 3, above). This relationship finds its obvious parallel in that between the titular teens in The HandleBards’ *Romeo and Juliet*, whose heightened emotions were used for comic effect but also to gesture towards an “intense, utopic romanticism” that creates “moments of magic and communion in performance” (Dolan, “Performance” 472). By celebrating these characters who were, for a time at least, living “at the height of [their] emotional and [...] experiential capacities,” each production modelled a utopian society rooted in acceptance of each member’s authentic self (Dolan, “Performance” 472). At the level of the individual, both *Midsummer* and *Romeo and Juliet* proposed “modes of selfhood” (Dolan, “Performance” 477) rooted in collective joy after tragedy. After periods of pandemic-induced restrictions across most aspects of daily life, the productions both “[called] the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense” (Dolan, *Utopia* 5).

## Do It Yourself (DIY): from the Balcony to the DJ Booth

Both the Globe’s *Midsummer* and The HandleBards’ *Romeo and Juliet* celebrated amateurism and passionate imperfection. This was embodied in the mechanicals’ performance style in *Midsummer* and in the character changes in *Romeo and Juliet* (each actor played multiple roles and costume changes frequently took longer than scene changes, which they occasionally drew attention to by doing extra laps of the stage declaring “She’s not ready yet!”). It also manifested in elements of the productions’ design aesthetics, which might be described as DIY (Do It Yourself).



Figure 4: DIY design—Lucy Green as Juliet in The HandleBards’ *Romeo and Juliet* (2021 tour, Coventry Cathedral performance), dir. Nel Crouch  
Photo by Garry Jones, courtesy of The HandleBards

In the Globe’s *Midsummer*, Peter Quince began the “Pyramus and Thisbe” scene in a garishly hand-decorated DJ booth that was “powered” by the groundling standing in for Starveling on an exercise bike in the yard, much to the audience’s delight. In *Romeo and Juliet*, each prop was part of what Peter Kirwan identifies as the HandleBards’ “eco-activism:” the company cycle between venues and so parts of their sets, and some props, are “comprised of bicycle parts and tools” (Kirwan). Other elements must be lightweight and foldable for easy transportation. Juliet’s balcony (Figure 4, above), for example,

was a piece of decorated fabric attached to a hoop and worn about Green’s body with a set of braces.

I propose that what these design choices suggested to the productions’ audiences is that theatre does not have to be highly polished to be powerful and, by extension, that life does not have to be perfect to be enjoyed. The productions both provide support for Dolan’s hunch that utopian performatives can transport us “out of the banal” but “[t]he materials of such transport can be modest; that is, impressive scenery and helicopters hovering in the flies of a stage aren’t required to provoke such feeling” (*Utopia* 169). The hand-made set pieces and props also gestured towards a simpler way of life that might be adopted post-pandemic, one that is characterised by a can-do, DIY attitude and that is kinder to a planet facing ecological collapse.

### **Share Joy with Others: Audience Participation and Direct Address**

The final element of the productions which gestured towards a simpler, happier, more communitarian world was the actors’ eagerness to share their work with others. Each performance began with a heartfelt welcome back to in-person theatre which provoked loud applause from the audiences. There was acknowledgement—both on stage and off—that theatre had been greatly missed and that the actors were thrilled to be doing what they loved once again. Both productions also had a generosity of spirit that was expressed through direct address and opportunities for audience participation, creating intersubjective moments which, as Dolan points out, “often become utopian performatives” (“Performance” 471).

The Globe’s *Midsummer* and The HandleBards’ *Romeo and Juliet* modelled joyfulness, carefree selfhood, passionate love and, above all, hope despite the constraints of society (in Verona, Athens, York, or London). In *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* Dolan asks herself if it is “too much to ask of performance, that it teach us to love and to link us with the world, as well as to see and to think critically about social relations?” What I hope to have shown though in this discussion of *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is that even (or perhaps especially) in times of crisis, performance really can teach us these things. Having shared and celebrated the positive impacts that these silly, celebratory Shakespeares had on me in the immediate aftermath of the Coronavirus lockdowns, I now wish to consider whether these productions and their utopian performatives had wider, or lasting, impacts.

Pondering “how [...] the profoundly moving experience of utopian performatives in performance” might “be conveyed or carried into the world outside the theatre,” Dolan finds hope in conversations “struck up” between

strangers (*Utopia* 18) which allow “the moment of performance to linger longer” (*Utopia* 19). In the uneasy period between lockdowns when I saw both productions under discussion, however, we stuck to our “prosaic, individual arrangements of singles, couples, or trios” wading “through the crowd to the exit doors” (Dolan, *Utopia* 18) more than ever. Watching the Globe’s *Midsummer* remotely, I was unable to “linger” at all. Perhaps, then, “the breath-taking moment of potential connection and emotion” was “severed as soon as the house lights” went up in York, or when the audience left the Globe, or when I closed my browser after Puck’s final farewell (Dolan, *Utopia* 18). This would suggest that the impacts of these productions, and the “hopeful feeling[s]” they instilled, were extremely limited. However, in her book’s conclusion Dolan finds hope despite the necessary severance that occurs after performance. Asking “[w]hat, finally, do communitas and the utopian performative *do*? What is their action in the world?”, Dolan wonders whether “we burden them even by posing this question” (*Utopia* 169, emphasis in original):

Perhaps utopian performatives create the *condition* for action; they pave a certain kind of way, prepare people for the choices they might make in other aspects of their lives. [...] We too often flounder on the shoals of “what does this *do*,” when how something *feels* in the moment might be powerful enough (*Utopia* 169-170, emphasis in original).

I did not leave the Globe’s *Midsummer* or The HandleBards’ *Romeo and Juliet* feeling “galvanized” in the same way that Dolan reports people did following performances at the Rude Mechs’ theatre, Off Center (“Performance” 468). Nor was I moved towards feelings of “political agency” (“Performance” 477). I did, however, feel more joyful, more hopeful, more connected, and less alone. As Dolan so succinctly puts it: “perhaps such intensity of *feeling* is politics enough for utopian performatives” (*Utopia* 20, emphasis in original).

## **Our Revels Now are Ended**

Utopian performatives are characterised by their transience and, inevitably, the simple joy of these Shakespeares was fleeting. Both venues have since hosted visually and thematically darker productions that have used Shakespeare not as a vehicle for celebration but to explore important social and political issues. For instance, The Globe’s 2021 *Romeo and Juliet* (directed by Ola Ince) used the tragedy to tackle contemporary knife crime and the UK’s mental health crisis. Jacob Hughes’ design for the production had a stark black, white and red colour palette (Figure 5, below). It also prominently featured sobering text on LED screens above the stage (“20 percent of teenagers experience depression before



reaching adulthood,” “75 percent of all children with mental health problems are not receiving treatment,” “When boys are taught the rules of patriarchy, they are forced to deny their feelings”). Tonally, it could not have been further from the vibrant and light-hearted *Midsummer* that had opened the theatre’s post-lockdown season and brought so much joy to that stage.



Figure 5: Alfred Enoch as Romeo, Sirine Saba as Nurse and Zoe West as Benvolio in *Romeo and Juliet*, dir. Ola Ince, (Shakespeare’s Globe, 2022)  
Photo by Marc Brenner, courtesy of Shakespeare’s Globe

The next production of a Shakespeare play that York’s Theatre Royal hosted was Northern Broadsides and New Vic Theatre’s earnest touring co-production of *As You Like It* (directed by Laurie Sansom), which explored queerness and non-binary gender identities in a cold and hostile forest of leafless trees represented by hat stands (Figure 6, below). I do not wish to suggest that these productions could not conjure “the soaring sense of hope, possibility, and desire that imbues utopian performatives” (Dolan, *Utopia* 7-8). As Dolan is keen to point out, utopian performatives “exceed the content of a play or performance” and audiences might find them in “even the most dystopian theatrical universe” (*Utopia* 8). Indeed, there was hope to be found in *As You Like It*’s general message of expressing your true self on your own terms through clothing. But the visions of utopia that might have been found in the Globe’s *Romeo and Juliet* or the Northern Broadsides/New Vic Theatre *As You Like It* looked very different from those offered by the productions I have discussed here.



Figure 6: EM Williams as Rosalind in the 2022 Northern Broadsides and New Vic Theatre co-production of *As You Like It*, dir. Laurie Sansom  
Photo by Andrew Billington, courtesy of Northern Broadsides

In other circumstances, The HandleBards' *Romeo and Juliet* and the Globe's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* might have been dismissed as simplistic. In the post-lockdown moment, however, they offered audiences joy in both style and substance and fostered "hopeful feeling[s]" when such feelings had proved hard to find. The productions gestured towards real hope for the future in the wake of collective trauma and demonstrated the importance of theatre in challenging times.

Preparing this article has forced me consider the extent to which utopian performatives are "felt and gone even as we reach out to save them" (Dolan, *Utopia* 168). The productions I have discussed here certainly contained "moments of liminal clarity and communion, fleeting, briefly transcendent bits of profound human feeling and connection" which sprung "from alchemy between performers and spectators and their mutual confrontation with a historical present that lets them imagine a different, putatively better future" (Dolan, *Utopia* 168). However, looking back on them from the summer of 2022 has required me to ask myself if the hope I found in such joyful productions was naïve. The "better future" that they gestured towards has not materialised: Covid continues to rumble on and various crises (new and old) face the British population, and British theatres. Yet even as the summer passes and the country

prepares for a winter of discontent, returning to The Globe’s *Midsummer* and The HandleBards’ *Romeo and Juliet* to explore the utopian performatives they contained has reminded me that there is joy to be found in a “Ninja Friar” with a water pistol and that there is hope in a theatre full of people singing along to a brass band rendition of Isley-Jasper-Isley’s uplifting solidarity ballad “Caravan of Love”. More seriously, the productions have provided a timely reminder that more hopeful futures are possible—we just have to “admire and believe in a utopia-in-process as a social goal,” as Dolan does, “even if it remains a beautiful, intangible product of the ineffable [...] or the marvelous” (170).

One by one we’re gonna stand up with the pride  
One that can’t be denied  
(Stand up, stand up, stand up, stand up)  
From the highest mountain and valley low  
We’ll join together with hearts of gold

Now the children of the world can see  
There’s a better way for us to be...

Isley-Jasper-Isley, *Caravan of Love* (1985)

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