

<b>Institution: UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: D29 English Language and Literature</b>
<b>Title of case study: Debating Shakespeare in the Olympic Year</b>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>This project created a new space for public debate surrounding the World Shakespeare Festival, which was a key strand in the UK's 2012 Cultural Olympiad. By creating a collaborative online forum that invited cultural conversation, the project facilitated discussion about the role of Shakespeare and the arts in twenty-first century culture as well as generating the only complete, critical, and publicly-accessible account of the largest intercultural celebration of Shakespeare ever staged. The project is an exemplar of interdependent research and impact.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>In the last decade the Shakespeare Institute (SI), a postgraduate research centre that is part of the University of Birmingham, has become an international leader in the field of Shakespeare, cultural value, and publicly-funded arts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Initial research by Professor Kathleen E. McLuskie led to the award of a major grant from the AHRC in 2006 for the project 'Interrogating Cultural Value in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Case of Shakespeare', leading to the appointment of Dr Kate Rumbold as Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, the recruitment of two PhD researchers, and the forthcoming (January 2014) publication of the monograph <i>Valuing Shakespeare in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century England</i> with Manchester University Press.</p> <p>While the project focused specifically on the UK context, research undertaken for it repeatedly pointed to the global dimensions of Shakespeare as a figure of cultural value, leading to a University strategic appointment in the field of Global Shakespeare Studies. Dr Sullivan was appointed to this position in 2010 and charged with working alongside the cultural value research team to develop the international reach of the project. Building on her existing research into 'anti-Bardolatry', cultural studies, and identity formation, Sullivan won a further AHRC award under the Connected Communities theme to research the Shakespeare-related events in the 2012 London Olympic celebrations and their valuation among global audiences. One of the major innovations of this project, entitled 'Shakespeare's Global Communities: A Research Review of the World Shakespeare Festival', was to embed impact-related activities within the research process, and in doing so to help answer the central research question, 'What does the World Shakespeare Festival reveal about Shakespeare's status as a site for intercultural community building and value creation in the twenty-first century?'</p> <p>The central manifestation of the research project was a professionally produced, multi-user digital platform called <a href="http://www.yearofshakespeare.com">www.yearofshakespeare.com</a>, which was open to diverse communities of practice for cultural debate about the World Shakespeare Festival and its related events (more of which in section 4). In order to maximize the quality and reach of the platform, Sullivan (the project's principal investigator) invited Dr Paul Prescott of the University of Warwick and Dr Paul Edmondson of The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (SBT) to join as co-investigator and cultural partner. Prescott brought to the project expertise in modes of theatre reviewing, in particular theatre blogging and digital reception, and Edmondson brought expertise from digital outreach undertaken in the heritage sector.</p> <p>Together this core team assembled a research network of academics, theatre practitioners, and heritage specialists with expertise in Global Shakespeare studies, digital humanities, appropriation studies, and civic Shakespeare to contribute to the platform and to discuss reactions voiced within it as well as within the wider press coverage related to the 2012 Olympics. University of Birmingham network members included all of the cultural value researchers mentioned above, as well as Digital Research Fellow David Hopes and Shakespeare Institute Director Professor Michael Dobson, whose work on amateur Shakespeare directly influenced programming in the 'Open Stages' part of the World Shakespeare Festival. Other members came from higher education institutions across the UK as well as key cultural institutions including the Shakespeare Birthplace</p>

Trust Museums and Collections, the Royal Shakespeare Company, and Shakespeare's Globe.

Members of the research network interacted with one another through the digital platform and also met for two research workshops organized by Sullivan, the first in London in June 2012 and the second in Stratford-upon-Avon in September 2012. These workshops allowed researchers to begin to pool cross-sector responses to the Festival and to start identifying emerging themes in the research process, including tensions between modes of regional, national, and international celebration; the relationship between cultural value, capital, and hegemony; and the challenges that both digital and non-Anglophone communication pose to established loci of authority. Shakespeare-related productions and events, the research team found, played an active role within each of these debates, and as such offered an important case study of how the arts and humanities are mobilized to participate in global performances of national power and influence.

A full documentary account of the Festival has now been published by Bloomsbury in *A Year of Shakespeare: Re-living the World Shakespeare Festival*, edited by Sullivan and her co-investigators. Unlike most academic books, the collection is being marketed to a trade readership and has been praised by Dame Margaret Drabble as 'Shakespeare criticism as you have never encountered it before ... It takes Shakespeare from the stage and academe into the age of Twitter and Facebook and makes you feel you were there, present at all those strange and wonderful productions you missed.' The book was released on 11 April 2013 and in the first 10 weeks it has already sold 665 copies worldwide (a considerable feat given that many academic print runs in the field are set at 500 copies total). A second collection, focusing in more detail on the critical issues raised during the two workshops, will be published with Bloomsbury in 2014.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1) 2011. Special issue of *Shakespeare Survey* on 'Shakespeare as Cultural Catalyst' (vol. 64), featuring four articles from each member of the AHRC Cultural Value project (McLuskie, Rumbold, Linnemann, Olive) [DOI: 10.1017/CCOL9781107011229]
- R2) Sullivan, Erin (2013). 'Olympic Performance in the Year of Shakespeare'. In *A Year of Shakespeare: Re-living the World Shakespeare Festival*. Edited by Paul Edmondson, Paul Prescott, and Erin Sullivan. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. 3-11 [available from HEI on request].
- R3) Sullivan, Erin (2012). 'Year of Shakespeare'. Project digital platform. [www.yearofshakespeare.com](http://www.yearofshakespeare.com)
- R4) Sullivan, Erin (2007). 'Anti-Bardolatry through the Ages – or, why Voltaire, Tolstoy, Shaw and Wittgenstein Didn't Like Shakespeare'. *Opticon1826*, vol. 2. <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/opticon1826/archive/issue2>

#### Research funding:

2012. AHRC award: Shakespeare's global communities: a research review of the 2012 World Shakespeare Festival and Globe to Globe season. AH/J012017/1. £39,422.80. PI Sullivan.

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

In contrast to many arts and humanities research projects, in which impact is undertaken after research conclusions have been reached, Sullivan embedded cross-sector impact activity into the research process of 'Shakespeare's Global Communities'. This meant that engagement and interaction with stakeholders beyond traditional academic boundaries became a crucial part of the project's data collection and analysis.

#### Facilitating public debate

Working closely with Dr Edmondson and the SBT, the world's leading charity in promoting the works, life, and times of Shakespeare, significantly expanded the wider reach of the project. By embedding [www.yearofshakespeare.com](http://www.yearofshakespeare.com) within the SBT's existing [BloggingShakespeare.com](http://bloggingshakespeare.com) digital platform, the project team was able to link the site to the over 1,500 readers already subscribed to the SBT's RSS blog feed and the over 5,000 followers of the SBT on Twitter and Facebook. Sullivan, Prescott, and Edmondson also worked with the SBT's digital partner, Misfit, Inc. ([misfit-inc.com](http://misfit-inc.com)), a company with extensive experience in social media campaigns, to produce an interactive and media-rich digital space that would appeal to users beyond academia.

The appeal of the site was reflected in the reception it received. [www.yearofshakespeare.com](http://www.yearofshakespeare.com) launched on April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2012, Shakespeare's 448<sup>th</sup> birthday, and by the close of the project on November 15<sup>th</sup> 2012 the homepage and the site's 131 reviews and blog posts had received more than 37,615 hits from users in ninety-one different countries spread across six continents, meaning that in total [www.yearofshakespeare.com](http://www.yearofshakespeare.com) averaged over 5,500 visits for each month of the World Shakespeare Festival. The site averaged 20 production reviews and blog posts per month (one for each working day), written not only by the established research network but also by readers from across the world who became involved in the online discussion concerning Shakespeare, the Olympics, and global culture (see source 1 below). High-profile readers – including: representatives from the Edinburgh International Festival; the actor and author Ben Crystal; and *The Guardian* theatre reviewer Andrew Dickson - featured the project in their Twitter feeds, commenting that it was 'full of gems & well worth excavation'. Professor Stanley Wells drew further attention to the project in his article on the World Shakespeare Festival for *The Stage*, a weekly theatre publication with a circulation of approximately 34,000 copies per week (source 2).

Very significantly, the critical record created includes a wide range of voices and opinions. Alongside the reviews and blogs posted in the site are over 270 reader comments; over 60 audio and video interviews with Festival audience members, including ones given in British Sign Language; and over 200 Twitter, Facebook, and blog reactions to productions linked together through threads in Storify, which is a social media tool that lets users create timelines or stories from diverse media content (source 1).

The plurality of this online discussion brought increased attention to the multiple ways in which cultural value is constructed for different user groups, illustrating the complex global dynamics at work in cultural exchange and changing the way in which users understood Shakespeare's value in their own culture. In a conversation following a Swahili *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at The Globe in London, an audience member told our interviewer that s/he 'didn't really know about Shakespeare before' and that 'it was nice to see a Swahili play in London' (source 3 below). Likewise, in a response to a review of a Nigerian production of *The Winter's Tale*, one reader described the pride she felt at seeing her diasporic community represented at The Globe: 'It was an amazing night. As an early thirties Yoruba girl, it was glorious to see so many of my contemporaries in the audience and loving the interaction between so many different generations.' In response to a blog post about the Olympics Opening Ceremony, several readers debated the cultural significance of the speech from *The Tempest* that was used to open the show, noting in particular its colonial themes: 'The context of the play provides a relevant symbolism, as topical today as any other time', one reader wrote. '[I w]onder if the Olympic creative team meant it.' Such exchanges revealed the multifaceted reactions audiences were having to the World Shakespeare Festival within the context of the global Olympic Games, leading one reader, who later became a project blogger, to comment, 'What's most important [about the WSF] is that the questions around Shakespeare are making an impact beyond Shakespeare.'

### **Preserving heritage and influencing practice**

While other arts and culture websites attempted to cover as many of the Festival's productions and events as possible – most notably *The Guardian* and *The Arts Desk* – the geographic and temporal scope of the Festival made this a considerable challenge (productions occurred not just in London and Stratford-upon-Avon but also South Wales, Newcastle, and Edinburgh). In the end, [www.yearofshakespeare.com](http://www.yearofshakespeare.com) was the only site to document and debate all of the Festival's 74 productions and events, meaning that it has become the only complete critical record available of Shakespeare's presence in the Olympic celebrations. The record remains open for contribution until 23 April 2014, at which time the SBT, which manages the official archives for the RSC, will create a trusted digital repository of all the content and archive it in perpetuity in their collections, which are freely accessible to the public. This means that this complete record of the Festival has been created not only for the present moment, but also for the future.

Edmondson describes the project as a time capsule full of messages to future generations, and the SBT's Collections Archivist has likewise emphasised how the project 'provides a new opportunity

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for theatre audiences to have their voices preserved', since 'historically, the "public voice" has been supplied only via published reviews'. Such an ambition has also challenged the SBT, a major UK heritage centre, to work with project members to create new ways of preserving culture digitally: 'The project has allowed the SBT to develop a methodology for preserving such online content, and we have learnt lessons around rights clearance and the need for a prompt workflow to capture data in the (often ephemeral) online environment. The archive is now better equipped to capture and preserve output in this increasingly important area of digital documentary heritage' (source 4).

In addition to helping shape new archival practices, the project has also influenced thinking in the creative sector. In its emphasis on the cultivation of dialogue surrounding arts events (and in particular those drawing on public funding), the project included arts administrators, educators, actors, and directors in its conversations online. The open format of the collaborative blog allowed artists involved in the Festival to 'write back' to the reviewer if they wanted to add a different point of view. Jackson Doran, an actor from the American Q Brothers' hip-hop production of *Othello*, participated in the online debate, explaining how the 'truncated' rehearsal period for the show led to some of the artistic choices commented on in the project's review of it, as well as thanking the reviewer for offering an 'insightful' analysis and 'thinking about [the show] in a way I think it needs to be thought about'. Likewise, Tim Crouch, director of the *Julius Caesar*-inspired *I, Cinna (The Poet)*, responded to the reviewer's discussion of the educational elements embedded in the show, offering his own account of his artistic and educational objectives. He concluded by acknowledging the importance of debate in these matters: 'Thanks for giving me this chance to write these things down!', a statement that highlighted the relative lack of dialogue usually available between theatre practitioners, academics, and the wider public.

On a broader scale, key WSF and Cultural Olympiad producers have taken note of the project. Ruth Mackenzie, Director of the London 2012 Festival, requested a copy of the final project report to help aid her own reflection and self-evaluation, and copies were also given to Deborah Shaw and Tom Bird, producers of the Festival at the RSC and Globe, respectively. This two-way exchange of professional work marks a shift in the way academics working on Shakespeare in performance and theatre practitioners creating Shakespeare in performance interact with and learn from one another.

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- [1] Website data – traffic stats, number of video/audio uploads, Twitter stats – available on request
- [2] Wells, S. *The Stage*, 7 June 2012, p. 8
- [3] Collated interviews with audience members at Globe / RSC – available on request
- [4] Factual statement provided by Collections Archivist, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.
- [5] AHRC special feature: <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/News-and-Events/Features/Pages/A-Playwright-for-the-World.aspx>