

M3C DTP Collaborative Doctoral Award (CDA) Project Brief

Project Title			
Cutting Shakespeare: promptbook practice in Stratford and beyond			
LEAD INSTITUTION			
Name of HEI institution	University of Birmingham		
Lead regional city	Birmingham <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Leicester <input type="checkbox"/>	Nottingham <input type="checkbox"/>
PARTNER ORGANISATION			
Name of organisation	Royal Shakespeare Company		
Website URL	www.rsc.org.uk		
THE RESEARCH PROJECT			
<p>Shakespeare's plays have rarely been performed in the theatre without a measure of pre-performance editing and curtailment, recorded in 'promptbooks' – the copies used by stage managers, prompters, lighting technicians and others to regulate performances. Through collaboration with the Royal Shakespeare Company – one of the world's leading theatre companies and the largest single theatrical employer in the UK – this project will examine the company's entire history of cutting Shakespeare for performance. The RSC hosts an unrivalled archive of its own promptbooks (and others, documenting the work of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre back to 1879) which will provide the primary source material for this research. As a project designed not only to illuminate changing patterns within the company's work to date but to inform the company's future practice, key questions will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How far did the sort of live Shakespeare seen in Stratford actually change when the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre was rebranded as the RSC, professedly committed to a rigorous, informed return to Shakespeare's early texts rather than to the imitative reproduction of theatrical tradition? • Which scholarly or commercial printed editions of Shakespeare have been used by RSC practitioners, and for what reasons? • Has the RSC's practice around the preparation of promptbooks been significantly different to that of other companies? • Do directors who prefer to allow actors to have a share in deciding cuts during the rehearsal process end up making the same cuts as those who bring only a pre-cut text to the first read-through? • How do audiences and critics understand the relations between text and performance, and how far are they conscious of the editorial dimension of theatrical practice? • Which cuts to a given script are most likely to be replicated independently by directors unaware of earlier promptbooks, and why? <p>Working extensively at the RSC itself, the research student will primarily be engaged in analysing, examining and collating materials in the RSC's promptbook collection, housed in the nearby library of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, as well as related primary materials held by the University of Birmingham Shakespeare Institute's own library (in particular RSC actors' part-books, notebooks and rehearsal diaries, and, for comparison, promptbooks documenting the work of other troupes such as the New Shakespeare Company,</p>			

based in Regent's Park). This project will also involve interviews with practitioners and with audience members, for which dedicated specialist training will be offered, and is also likely to include documenting the present-day process by which an RSC promptbook is prepared during the course of discussions and rehearsals taking place prior to a particular staging. The research student will draw on, and develop, a combination of expertises, in theatre history, in editorial history, and in the description and analysis of present-day practice.

As part of the collaborative practice, this project will also involve preparing contributions for online and print media (including RSC newsletters and programmes) which reach audiences interested in Shakespeare locally, nationally, and internationally. The project is likely to have major ramifications for directorial practice beyond Stratford-upon-Avon, showcasing how research and artistic practice from the Midlands region reaches out to the wider world. The possibility of performing well-known plays 'anew' (informed by the thesis findings and directors' cuts recommendations) has implications for audience development, advancing the understanding of the cultural economy in the Midlands region through specialist sector expertise. This project thus seeks to build capacity in an area that is otherwise challenging for theatre practitioners regionally and nationally to develop in sustained terms.

HOW TO FIND OUT MORE

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