Following the invitation from the *Cahiers Élisabéthains* editors to write a ‘lockdown review’, I decided to incorporate the project into my teaching. I asked 15 students to watch an online streaming of Gregory Doran’s *Henry V* for the Royal Shakespeare Company in their respective homes, and then write a review, with specific focus on the experience of solitary ‘theatregoing’. These students from a variety of countries were enrolled in a course titled ‘Leadership in Culture’, which analyses leadership in Shakespeare’s plays. In the previous three weeks, they had studied the play and background literature, and presented on a variety of topics and scenes. I was curious to see the impact this novel theatre-going experience would have on this group, between the ages of 20 and 23. The set-up was that we all started watching the production at the same time, 3 p.m., using the Marquee TV streaming service. During the break, coinciding with the interval in the live performance, we would take 15 minutes to share our experiences on a discussion board. Then, immediately after the production, we would share brief comments through WhatsApp. Finally, the students would hand in their individual reviews, which we would discuss during the following lecture. This review/report provides insights into the students’ viewing experiences under lockdown.

Not unexpectedly, the students’ material conditions varied a lot, but a recurring phenomenon was a certain amount of distraction due to the home environment. One student noted that the ‘upstairs neighbours, despite being very nice people, tend to play football in their home. This means that while trying to focus on Shakespeare’s play, my viewing experience was accompanied by a football being kicked around’. Several students were living in shared student accommodation: ‘my house is full of stimuli; every time one of my housemates walks in, I would start a conversation with them instead of focusing on the play’. Some mentioned the effect that Internet connection had on their experience:

> we have a really bad Wi-Fi; in order to be able to stream the play, I had to ask the whole household to turn off all their devices. It’s like: ‘No, you cannot read the news or call your friend right now, because I need to watch *Henry V*’.

Overall, the viewing experience was less intense than when attending a performance in the theatre, and a recurring complaint was the sense of watching alone: ‘The absence of theatre conditions, being immersed and surrounded by an audience, made it seem much longer and at times slightly dull’.

Some of the students recreated some of the rituals of a live performance, such as turning off the mobile phone: ‘A theatre ritual that I employed was putting my phone away. This may seem obvious, but I struggled with this more than I thought I would and
found myself reaching for my phone when I was watching’. In recreating some of these practices, students also sought to recapture the excitement:

I started the play with a simple left-click of the mouse and was considerably less excited than I would normally be. To mimic the experience in the best possible way, I connected the stream to my TV instead of my laptop and poured myself a cold beer, as if I had bought it at the theatre bar. Yet, as I watched by myself, there were no other spectators sitting around me.

Apart from the immersion and the auditorium, most students also missed the routines surrounding a production:

I missed out on the experience of actually going to the theatre with my friends, the theatre rituals such as booking tickets, getting ready to go to the theatre, building up the excitement, and perhaps have a drink before or after the show.

The online tools set up for communication during the break and after the production provided poor compensation: ‘The Discussion Board helped me glimpse into how others felt about the performance, but typing on a Discussion Board will never be the same as holding a conversation in the theatre or in the pub afterwards’.

Another aspect noted by many students was the ongoing pandemic, which influenced their perception. On one hand, they experienced a general sense of isolation, due to ongoing negative media coverage, social distancing, and the closure of many of the venues they would usually visit. On the other hand, the overabundant use of electronic devices, in part due to online classes, led to an increased sense of fatigue in connection with media usage:

The most crucial point: too many screen hours. The current circumstances leave us few options to continue our lives as before. Since online learning began, I have been spending much more time sitting in front of my laptop and ‘interacting’ through a screen. Both things that I find mentally draining and hard on my body.

Most students, however, also saw advantages in watching the production online rather than in the theatre. For one thing, the home conditions also presented positive aspects such as being able to watch within the comfort of one’s own home; one student compared this with a previous experience:

I had watched Benedict Cumberbatch’s Hamlet on a screen, but in a theatre [as a National Theatre Live broadcast]. Compared to that, watching Henry V in the comfort of my own room was much more enjoyable: the cookies my flatmate baked halfway through the performance were not eye-wateringly expensive, I could drink an ice-cold beer from my fridge without scrambling for my ID, and I could make comments as loudly as I pleased without receiving death glares from everyone within a two-metre radius.

More generally, many students mentioned the benefit of having access to English subtitles, and most of them also (and uncritically) applauded the close-ups and the focus that the camerawork provided:
On the bright side, I could see the facial expressions even better than those sitting on the front two rows, which enabled me to read the characters better and appreciate the acting more. Thus, the online format provided clarity and a very good observation angle.

As far as the production itself, two things stood out. The first was a moment that occurred during 2.3, when students applauded as Pistol took leave of his wife, which they argued revealed ‘great tragedy and solemnity’. From a screening perspective, it was an unmistakable highlight, as the camera zoomed in on Pistol, Bardolph, Nym, Boy, and Nell Quickly, placing them in a triangle set against a black background. The camera transcended those five ordinary human beings contemplating the loss of Falstaff, framing them into an impressive composition – almost an oil-painting that combined Raphael’s compositional brilliancy with Caravaggio’s chiaroscuro and Rembrandt’s expressive colouring. Wedged in between the English and French courts, this moment gave a brief glimpse of what it truly meant to be a human being in an otherwise bleak and shallow world.

The second notable item was more of a surprise in my view, in that the students seemed delighted and startled by the amount of humour in the production, as was observed by one student:

The action begins with the chorus picking up the crown, only to have it snatched away by a defiant Henry: perhaps a reference to the weak claim to the throne, or perhaps showing the segregation between nobility and servants. Either way, this humorous start set in motion something I had not expected from this play: I was laughing!

A plethora of incidents were recalled by almost all of the students about the ‘incredibly funny’ scenes in the play. It was something I had generally missed, and it reminded me not to grow into a grumpy, old man. Then again, I suppose it is hard to keep laughing about jokes that you have heard so often before.

The end of the production was accompanied by a virtual applause on WhatsApp using the standard emoticons and accompanied by some brief, Twitterish comments. No pub, though, no crowding out of the theatre, no sense of buzz or excitement: this reminded the students once again, of all that was lacking, and how little there was to make up for this. Nonetheless, the positive moments in this COVID-19 streaming experience illustrated the students’, and perhaps their generation’s, collective resilience, even when so much is lost and so little gained.

**Author biography**

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