

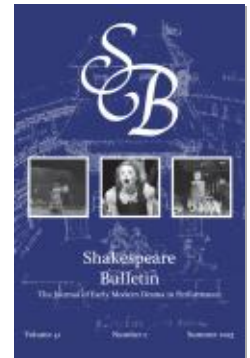


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Process of Departures: Conversations and Practice in
Adapting *Titus Andronicus*

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**Process of Departures:
Conversations and Practice in Adapting *Titus
Andronicus***

STEPHEN DROVER

I'm sitting beside the playwright in our well-lit rehearsal room with an orange foam pool noodle in my hand; hers is blue. Five figures are clustered together in the middle of the room, huddled unnaturally, and smiling mischievously at me. Each is wearing a full-length black spandex bodysuit, stuffed with shirts, scarves, and rags to create bulges; some have an arm tucked in to give the appearance of a stump. One of them looks at the others as if to get permission, and they all nod a wicked approval. He extricates himself from the clump and the others readjust their positions to fill the space he has vacated. He tiptoes towards me, smiling and wringing his hands while the others look on in anticipation. When he gets close to me, he smiles and speaks:

“Hail, Rome! Victorious in thy fucking weeds.”

Wap! I hit him with the pool noodle.

“Thank you,” he says, smiling. Then: “Hail, Rome! Victorious in thy go fuck yourself.”

Wap! I hit him again.

“Thank you,” he repeats, still smiling. Then: “Hail, Rome!”

He hesitates. I raise my pool noodle threateningly.

“. . . victorious in thy mourning weeds,” he finishes, sweetly. I lower my pool noodle.

His smile broadens and he gives a small bow. He retreats to the clump, and they adjust to reabsorb him. They all smile a congratulations at the beaten figure. “Okay thanks, everybody!” I say. The clump dissolves as the actors relax into their real bodies and everyone laughs. The playwright is nodding, and I say “Okay, what did we learn?”

To suggest that the above exchange is a step in the creation process of a new adaptation of a Shakespeare play might be surprising. But exercises like this became part of the workflow for the creation of *The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius*, a play that integrates Shakespearean text and new writing with bouffon (the mid-twentieth-century school of French clowning) to relate the plot of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. In 2014 I commissioned playwright Colleen Murphy to adapt the play for Rumble Theatre in Vancouver, BC, and, over the next three years, I facilitated the development of the project as its dramaturg and (eventually) as the director of the production. The initial expectation was that the script would evolve via a familiar workflow: the playwright and dramaturg dialogue about goals and ideas; the playwright retreats and writes a draft, largely in solitude; a workshop is held to hear it read by actors; and repeat. At the time of the project's conception, the future final products—the adapted script and the production—were my primary concerns. However, over the next three years leading up to the play's premiere in 2017, it was the *process* of how the work evolved that became significant: through deeply collaborative relationships within a group of artists, unanticipated and remarkable workflows unfolded. In 2020, I started work as a dramaturg on (coincidentally and conveniently) another adaptation of *Titus Andronicus*—a play called *Black Fly* by Amy Lee Lavoie and Omari Newton—a project that has yet to reach production. Although this script has substantial thematic and structural differences from *Titus Bouffonius* (it centers Aaron and Lavinia as the narrative's new protagonists and significantly features hip-hop), its process of development has been likewise remarkable and surprising. It too has veered away from a conventional playwrighting workflow, has inspired its artists to embrace uncertainty, and invited experimentation with process. Most importantly, both processes have demonstrated qualities that are key to the analyses I explore in this article: the creative engine of collaboration, a recurring questioning of fidelity to the source material, and a driving interest in the reclamation of narratives.

So, what do these processes look like? How might we talk about and analyze the adaptation process? While established scholarship recognizes adaptation as both process and product (Hutcheon 9; Knowles iv), the majority of adaptation theory and analysis tends to focus on the *outcome* of adaptation. Douglas Lanier recognizes the frequently collaborative nature of contemporary adaptation and suggests that more consideration be paid to process:

Since adapting a source is often a corporate or communal process, there is a need for better accounts of the industrial and commercial conditions under which sources are adapted, with greater emphasis on charting the adaptational process rather than on reading the adaptational product. (“Shakespeare and Adaptation Theory” 48)

This invitation to chart the process of adaptation is one I find compelling, particularly given that *Titus Bouffonius* has completed its process (which resulted in the “products” of two professional productions and a published script) while *Black Fly* is still in development and engaged with process. Without a readily available model to chart these processes, perhaps analysis first requires a consideration of how these projects fit into the taxonomy of adaptation—that is, what do we call them? Lanier’s overview of the strands of adaptation theory recognizes how “nomenclatures are themselves vehicles for models, metaphors and theories of adaptation” (“Shakespeare and Adaptation Theory” 41), suggesting that appropriate classification of adaptation might provide an effective framework or model for understanding the new work. With an impulse to borrow a product label and apply it to process, I am initially attracted to Ruby Cohn’s inclusive umbrella term “offshoot” for Shakespeare rewritings that might encompass “abridgements, adaptations, additions, alterations, ameliorations, amplifications, augmentations, conversions, distortions, emendations, interpolations, metamorphoses, modifications, mutilations, revisions, transformations, versions” (3). Likewise, Julie Sanders’s articulation of appropriation (compared to adaptation) as a work that “frequently affords a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product or domain” (26) is also a fitting label for works that actively interrogate and question their relationship to a source. Yet, to accommodate permissive discussions around fidelity discourse, collaboration, and reclamation, I prefer the open-ended term “departure,” a designation somewhat less codified in common adaptation taxonomy yet freely and appropriately used in its analysis by many adaptation scholars. I will reference other classification models throughout this essay—including Genette’s standard “hypotext” and “hypertext” (5)—but “departure,” partly because it suggests the beginning of an active movement or journey (the rehearsal studio standing in for the departure gate at an airport), is especially well-suited for an analysis of process.

Since “departure” also connotes a temporal quality—there must have been a point in time when the work “departed” from the source material—it is worth considering a particular detail for each process: when did the new work actively and significantly “depart” from the hypertext during

its process of creation? What was the moment of inspiration that set the work on its own, distinct flight path? In his book *Shakespeare and Game of Thrones*, a volume to which we referred frequently during both processes, given this TV series' penchant for sometimes Shakespeare-inspired violence, Jeffrey R. Wilson offers an accessible, kinetic, and astute sports metaphor for the practice of deriving new material from Shakespeare's work: "The Shakespearean Slingshot" (Wilson 24). In much the same way as a race car driver or cyclist will "draft" an opponent—positioning oneself behind a competitor who exerts great effort while the trailer benefits from the lack of wind resistance—adaptations of Shakespeare will "ride behind" the source material, allowing it to do some narrative heavy lifting, and then "slingshot" around it to go in a new direction (24). It is at this point of departure—the "slingshot"—where an adaptation becomes its own play. To help contextualize the processes of both *Titus Bouffonius* and *Black Fly*, I will identify the slingshot moment when each project left behind the source material to take on a special life of its own.

The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius

After Colleen accepted my invitation to adapt *Titus Andronicus*, she started thinking about the ways in which Shakespeare's play positions the virtue of honor against a bloody narrative centering on families, and the project started to take shape in her mind as "a serious perspective on the notion of killing children in the name of honor" (Murphy, Personal interview). Interested in exploring this idea and before starting any writing, she proposed in a project outline that the play would be called *A Wilderness of Tigers*, a textual reference from *Titus Andronicus* that characterizes the nation as a wasteland of predators: "dost thou not perceive / That Rome is but a wilderness of tigers? / Tigers must prey, and Rome affords no prey / But me and mine" (3.1.53–6). Despite this apparently promising beginning, and consistent attempts to initiate writing, Colleen's efforts were stymied by her growing sense that the heart of the project was somehow missing. She had fallen into a common playwrighting trap of seeing a play as a theoretical meditation on an idea and so it was becoming an excessively intellectual exercise with no forward momentum. "It was coming into my head like a kind of a serious play. But it was a dead thing in my [mind]. It wasn't alive. It didn't have any life. And I really was stumped. I was really stumped" (Murphy, Personal interview).

The trajectory of the project was changed irrevocably when Colleen was coincidentally invited to a class presentation at the University of Alberta, where she was the Lee Playwright in Residence and where

Theatre Department faculty member Michael Kennard—of the clown duo Mump & Smoot—was leading his students through an exercise in the French clowning technique of bouffon. Rooted in the practice of mockery, “bouffons” often display physically grotesque characteristics, insult audience members, and parody the social systems that divide the “haves” from the “have-nots.” When done effectively, a bouffon taunts and ridicules privilege, comfort, and leisure. As articulated by Phillipe Gaulier, the preeminent teacher of bouffon, “When bouffons turn up at a theatre to tell the truth about the Devil, the liberator, they don’t play the part of a bastard or bitch. They parody bastards and bitches and imitate their shortcomings, in a grotesque or derisory way” (217). The bouffon invites us to laugh at things we might normally not find funny, and then to look inside ourselves to question our own humor. In Michael’s class, invited audience members were armed with dinner rolls that they were encouraged to hurl at the offensive, insulting, and grotesque bouffons, who would mock and insult them in turn. The effect was the creation of a forum in which taboo subjects could not only come alive but create a sense of unexpected joy. For Colleen, this event revealed a new and exciting path into a narrative that involved so much killing and dismemberment: by allowing an audience to find joy in chaos. Colleen discovered the inspiring moment of departure—the slingshot—that set the project on its own, clear course. We invited Michael to bring his expertise to the process and we adjusted our development plan to include in-studio experiments and workshops with actors who would train in the art of bouffon.

To provide the textual starting point for this new direction, Colleen created a framing device that would carry the project through to production. In her conceit, the play was about five members of the “Society for the Destitute”—social outcasts characterized by grotesque physical deformities and lewd behavior. The premise was that these bouffons had been awarded a small grant to mount a theater production and they had decided to stage *Titus Andronicus* “because it’s about grief, vengeance and the relish of murdering children—your own and other people’s” (Murphy, *The Society for the Destitute* 25). To begin the process, Michael (as the project’s “bouffon coach”) conducted a sort of “clown boot camp” to teach the company of five actors the skills of the bouffon clown. This training period was rooted in exploring improvisation, parody, scatological humor, physical grotesqueness, audience provocation, and the art of insult. Group behavior developed in tandem with character creation: in many ways, the bouffons thought with one brain and operated as a “clump,” physically clustering around one another and providing each other with protection

in jokes or naughtiness. This mischievous support system proved to be a buttress for creativity, as performers felt empowered to experiment and later to improvise with Shakespeare's text.

Black Fly

While the departure process of *Titus Bouffonius* benefited from a clear and game-changing slingshot moment, the evolution of *Black Fly* experienced two such forward leaps in its trajectory, both similarly characterized by new creative collaborations. In 2019, Repercussion Theatre in Montréal commissioned playwright Omari Newton to adapt a Shakespeare play of his choice. Omari had grown frustrated by Shakespeare productions that ignored obvious racial issues in favor of shoring up white, patriarchal narratives—a maneuver that overlooks the significant potential of Shakespeare's dramaturgical choices. As Omari put it, "Shakespeare didn't accidentally write Black characters into the canon" (Newton). This commission piqued his interest in exploring the character of Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, and possibly building an adaptation around him. When he invited his spouse and writing partner, playwright Amy Lee Lavoie, to cowrite the project with him, she suggested that the adaptation should also feature Lavinia as a sort of co-protagonist in the revisiting of the narrative. This shift in the dramatic responsibilities of the two characters marked the first slingshot moment of the project, as it required a significant departure from the framework of the source's plot. Amy Lee and Omari wanted to interrogate the racial and gender politics and problems inherent in the play and chose to redirect the narrative by branching off from a specific scene. The dramaturgical structure of the play became an "alternative second half" of *Titus Andronicus* that begins where Shakespeare's act three, scene two—the "fly scene"—sits in the source's plot. Thus, in addition to being a "departure," *Black Fly* (the product) might be considered to be what Cohn identifies as a "transformation": a type of Shakespeare "offshoot" that supplants Shakespearean characters (or derivatives of his characters) into non-Shakespearean plots (44). This relationship between source and new work can be recognized in a "sequel" (John Fletcher's *The Woman's Prize, or the Tamer Tamed*), a "prequel" (Erin Shields's *Queen Goneril*), or in a play whose timeline runs concurrently to that of the source (Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, or, more recently, Claire McCarthy's film *Ophelia*), also identified as a "grafting" by Sanders (55). *Black Fly*'s departure from, yet dependence upon, its source material will be discussed later in this article.

Shortly after a first draft of the script had been generated, I joined the process as its dramaturg. I was working with Amy Lee and Omari on another project, an original play called *Redbone Coonhound*, that interrogates racial microaggressions and parodies contemporary perspectives on race. The conversations from that process were feeding ideas for the Shakespeare departure and my involvement in *Black Fly* made sense. Unlike with *Titus Bouffonius*, I did not assist in the conception or initiation of this project but, rather, came onboard midstream to support it and the important conversations that were happening, and my attachment to the project coincided with a workshop that demonstrated how the process required a new slingshot. To echo the rhythms and tone of Shakespeare's verse, to inject a contemporary sensibility, and to explore a stylistic approach to the ways in which Aaron communicated, Amy Lee and Omari found inspiration in the idea of incorporating hip-hop into the play. They experimented with a rap-verse hybrid in writing Aaron's speech that made him sound exceptional in comparison to the domestic prose dialogue of the other characters. However, when we heard the first draft of the play read by classically trained and accomplished professional actors, the concept seemed to fail; without a deep appreciation and skill for how hip-hop worked, the text sounded like poorly written fake Shakespeare. It became clear that a new collaboration and a different set of performance skills were required to adequately explore this concept.

Coincidentally, Omari had recently worked with Daniel Faraldo (aka "Dan-e-o"), an award-winning Canadian hip-hop artist, on a project called *40 Parsecs and Some Fuel* with Obsidian Theatre for "21 Black Futures," a web series that also featured rap-as-dialogue. We invited Dan to participate in the project as the actor playing Aaron and as a hip-hop consultant who would help guide the dramaturgy of the text. Welcoming Dan into the project was the second vital slingshot moment that propelled the script forward on an exciting path. Amy Lee and Omari were both thrilled to work with an accomplished hip-hop artist and impressed with Dan's ear for dialogue. When I interviewed Omari, he praised Dan's "internal clock for rhyme and flow. If there's a syllable missing or if something isn't working right, he just feels it and is able to share with us how to fix it" (Newton). Dan's sphere of influence in the project expanded beyond the dialogue for Aaron and provided inspiration for much of the writing of *Black Fly*.

Assembling the Framework

Engaging with the processes of creating *Titus Bouffonius* and *Black Fly* has set in relief three factors that I propose can be assembled into an analytical framework for a Shakespeare adaptation process: collaboration involving nondramatic elements, negotiations of fidelity, and a reclamation of narrative. I outline these factors in an itemized fashion with the acknowledgment that creative processes rarely align themselves into neatly organized and isolated threads.

1. Collaboration

In *Collaborations with the Past*, Diana E. Henderson proposes collaboration as a framework for understanding how Shakespeare's texts can be reimagined. She suggests that "unlike the disembodied vocabulary of much theoretical writing on intertextuality or the zero-sum economics implied by 'appropriation'" (8), treating Shakespeare as a collaborator keeps him and his work at the center of the process. While Henderson focuses this collaborative model on the relationship that an adaptor has with the author of the source, I wish to (fittingly) appropriate, or redirect, the notion of collaboration to include the synergetic energies created by the bodily copresence of artists working together in a room to collectively create an original departure. Ironically, both *Titus Bouffonius* and *Black Fly* were conceived and initiated as operating under a conventional, hierarchical creation model that traditionally features a solo playwright as the main engine of creation. However, deep and impactful collaborative relationships in each project invited a multiplicity of creative voices that would consequently introduce nondramatic elements into the processes. The incorporation of these elements expanded the scope of the projects, and provided a vital and necessary "valorization of the performance dimension" (Jürs-Munby 6).

With *Titus Bouffonius*, when we first decided that bouffon would factor into the adaptation, we anticipated a scenario in which Michael would provide some coaching on basic clowning techniques that would be applied later in the rehearsal process once the text was complete. Yet it became clear that the construction of the clown characters, their interpretations of the Shakespeare text, and their interactions with the audience would provide the bulk of inspiration for the creation of the performance text. This resulted in a creation workflow based on training, improvisation, observation, discussion, and writing.

The project operated with two layers of narrative: the story of *Titus Andronicus* itself, and the story of the clowns attempting to perform their version of the play. The actor playing the bouffon, Sob, had to invest in the creation of Sob's life, which included a recent history of incarceration, his aspirations as director of the Society for the Destitute's meagre production, and an affinity for "old movies with Lawrence [*sic*] Olivier, Alec Guinness and Dirk Bogarde—men with chests" (Murphy, *The Society for the Destitute* 25). He walked on his tiptoes with a hunched back and claw-like hands. Additionally, the actor had to understand the narrative arc of *Titus Andronicus*, the character that Sob also insisted on portraying. Sob's interpretation of Titus had him stand with a puffed-up chest and walk with a wide and powerful stride. Speaking with me, Michael recalled the training drills designed to establish clear differentiations between these two manifestations of character, as the actors were required to swiftly switch back and forth between physical forms and energies:

I used to walk around the room with the drum. I would go "You're Shakespeare! You're bouffon! Shakespeare! Bouffon!" So that constant repetition [. . .] slowly gave us the vehicle that was going to make it really work. And it was that crisp in-and-out from the Shakespeare to the bouffon and the real clear separation that became a huge part of the show. (Kennard)

Initially intended to cement the physical differences between the two narrative threads, this exercise served as an early building block for a key recurring gesture in the performance script: moments when the bouffons would "drop the Shakespeare character" to correct each other or comment on the action as their bouffon selves. Many of these instances were drawn from explorations in the room and suggestions from the actors. For example:

SOB. (*as Titus*) HARK. . . Bassianus comes.
 LEAP. (*as Narrator*) Enter Bassianus.
 Enter Fink as Bassianus.
 FINK. (*as Bassianus*) Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your ears.
 BOOTS. WRONG.
 SPARK. WRONG.
 LEAP. WRONG.
 FINK. Fucking idiot—sorry. (*as Bassianus*) I am Assy-banus—Bassianus, I, Bassianus, am the SECOND-BORN son of the last man that wore the imperial crown of Rome so let my father's honors live in me. (Murphy, *The Society for the Destitute* 33–4)

The actor playing Fink had twice professionally played Antony in *Julius Caesar*, and in an earlier bouffon improvisation exercise comically fumbled his way through the famous speech as a way of exploring how Fink would negotiate the Shakespeare text. This reflected an exploration of how each bouffon had a favorite Shakespeare play and how they might—on purpose or accidentally—sabotage the playing of *Titus Andronicus* by inserting rogue lines into the dialogue. When Fink accidentally started speaking text from *Julius Caesar*, all the bouffons onstage simultaneously shifted their physical forms from the impressions of their assumed Shakespeare characters (Lavinia, Tamora, and Aaron) to the body shapes of the bouffons (Leap, Spark, and Boots). They admonished Fink, he berated himself, and apologized. They simultaneously shifted body shapes back to their Shakespeare characters to continue the scene.

This skill at “dropping character” collectively served to develop a “clump brain,” in Michael’s phrase, where the group also became adept at precise, collective responses to situations and impulses in performance that were not scripted. A vital part of the bouffon training was rooted not just in how the bouffon characters would interpret a script, but in the irreverent relationship they have with the spectator; openly mocking the audience became part of the training and a performance staple. When an audience member was discovered sleeping in her seat during one performance, the bouffons stepped out of the play, quietly approached her, and sang her a lullaby until she awoke, at which point they returned to the stage and their performances. This practice of responding to—and mocking—the audience continued through the run as audience members were caught eating, with a ringing cell phone, or trying to leave the theater. Although the bouffons never hesitated in confronting spectators, they always committed to a clear return to their script. Because the actors’ improvisations changed from night to night (depending on the audience’s behavior), many moments in the performance became joint creations of performers and audience.

In *Shakespeare & Audience in Practice*, Stephen Purcell outlines the qualities of theater experiences that capitalize on the “brazen flirtation” that performers can have with spectators (102). Performances that permit or encourage audiences to effect change on the drama can function as a sort of “live game rather than a pre-planned recital” (96), with the elements of surprise and discovery becoming a privilege of both audience and actor. “In such cases, the spectators become more than mere observers of a character’s behaviour: they become the *cause* of that behaviour” (106). For example, in his solo performance piece, *I, Malvolio*, Tim Crouch has



Fig. 1. Spark (Naomi Wright), Sob (Peter Anderson), and Boots (Sarah Afful), in *The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius*, dir. Stephen Drover. Rumble Theatre, 2017. Photograph by Tim Matheson, courtesy of Rumble Theatre.

orchestrated opportunities for the audience to contribute to the crafting of specific moments.

He “sees” the audience for the first time.

What’s actually written on my back?

The audience tell him.

Find that funny, do you?

He gets an audience member to remove the sign on his back—only to reveal the words “Kick me” underneath.

What’s written on my back?

The audience tell him. He asks for “any takers?” An audience member kicks him.

(Crouch 19)

Despite the allowances for seemingly unscripted moments with an audience, Crouch is primarily concerned with the integrity of the text, and regards any departures from the flow of the performance as “breakages” that are to be avoided (Purcell 9). *Titus Bouffonius*, however, does not include predetermined moments of interaction, and there was no plan for how to respond to such “breakages” in the live moment. Rather, the performers took joint responsibility for recognizing and embracing them

when they naturally occurred. Preparing and training for such occurrences required a unique level of collaboration in the rehearsal room.

The collaborative process for creating *Black Fly* likewise introduced the participating artists to a workflow they had not previously encountered, and which invited a larger consideration of culture in its discourse. By contributing to the development of the script as both an actor and a hip-hop consultant, Dan recognized his contribution to the adaptation and the question of how Shakespeare's text is to be appropriated in terms of hip-hop, rap, and Black culture. In our interview, he articulated this as a metaphor and entry point for all his conversations about the work:

In creating their own story, [Amy Lee and Omari as playwrights] are also creating the way in which the story is being communicated. By using rap, I think it adds an extra layer or even several layers of meaning and of depth, and of introducing a form of Black culture that is integral to the way in which we express ourselves through music, through rhyme, through poetry. (Faraldo)

This recognition of hip-hop as both an art form that is not traditionally linked with Shakespeare production and as an expression of Black culture helps determine the direction of the departure. However, in *Shakespeare and Popular Music*, Adam Hansen proposes the unlikely *compatibility* of Shakespeare and hip-hop by providing several examples of hip-hop recordings that refer to and comment upon Shakespeare's plays: Nas in Kelis's "In Public" invokes and adapts text from *Hamlet*, Outkast's song "ATLiens" recalls familiar lines from *As You Like It*, and Sylk-E. Fyne's "Romeo & Juliet" incorporates details of Shakespeare's plot (Hansen 67–8). Although Hansen's examination serves as a solid reference for *Black Fly*, the former presents a markedly different hypertext/hypertext relationship. These examples center upon the ways in which hip-hop is used to respond to and comment on Shakespeare's work and its cultural capital, while *Black Fly* uses hip-hop to help create a narrative and explore a character—a practice more closely represented by the work of the Q Brothers in their *Bomb-itty of Errors* and *Othello: The Remix*.

In any event, as Hansen proposes, Shakespeare and hip-hop go together surprisingly well. Kingslee James Daley (aka Akala) provides further evidence in his public talk/parlor game "Is it Shakespeare, or is it hip-hop?" in which he offers samples of text whose authorship might be unexpected. "The most benevolent king communicates for your dreams" or "judgment day cometh, conquer, it's war" are, perhaps surprisingly, not lines from Shakespeare—they were written by RZA as a solo artist and

with Wu-Tang Clan, respectively (“Akala and Hip-Hop Shakespeare”). Omari echoes the conviction that Shakespeare and hip-hop are “natural cousins”: “if you could put a great Shakespeare rhyme over a hip-hop beat and have the right MC do the right flow, it would sound like a rap song” (Newton). In *Black Fly*, the way in which Black culture and hip-hop are imbricated with Shakespeare suggest “a melding of cultures—there’s a melding of styles in creating this piece” (Faraldo).

For *Black Fly*, the “cultural melding” that Dan describes was not merely a stylistic choice but directly served a contemporary understanding of Aaron. Omari’s attraction to *Titus Andronicus* partly grew from an interest in using Shakespeare’s play as a backbone for exploring the rage, both quelled and exercised, felt by Aaron: “I’m approaching this through my lens which is driven somewhat by anger and frustration” (Newton). Traditionally, Aaron’s anger and bloodlust have been identified as *pleasurable* qualities for the character, a sort of sadism in contrast to Tamora’s somewhat justified, revenge-fueled anger. Gwynne Kennedy describes Aaron’s anger as “the pleasure in anticipated successful revenge, identified by Aristotle, that has degenerated into *delight in inflicting pain or injury for its own sake*” (257; emphasis added). While it is beyond the scope of this article to adequately investigate Aaron’s manifestation and placement of anger through the lens of critical race theory, it is worth considering an alternative perspective on Aaron’s anger: not as the infliction of pain for the purposes of pleasure, but that “Black anger is developed through Aaron at different moments where the play’s white ethnic characters racially chastise his Black body” (Brown 6). From this viewpoint, Aaron’s anger manifests in order to undo white supremacy and challenge an established and oppressive colonial system. *Black Fly* leans into this idea by establishing the uncomfortable premise that the Roman Empire (here, a stand-in for Elizabethan England or any modern-day western power) is built on a foundation of racism, as *Black Fly*’s Aaron outlines: “Who would trigger rape and murder in so many different places? / Dear listener you have missed the part that all of Rome are racists” (Lavoie and Newton 5).

In terms of how the play-text was generated in relation to these ideas, collaboration created an environment that invited meaningful conversations, allowed for surprises, and encouraged the work to grow in unexpected ways. During a full cast workshop session in which Aaron’s rap prologue was scrutinized for narrative as well as structure and rhyme, a multiplicity of voices yielded unexpected outcomes, as some artists who had no background in hip-hop, and very little in Shakespeare, found

themselves counting syllables and debating *le mot juste* for each line. A couplet like “Now that bitch ass mute, can’t play the lute, look too cute and young. / She’s unable to tell the fable ’bout how she was undone” (Lavoie and Newton 4) grew from the director’s suggestion that Aaron might call Lavinia a “bitch ass mute” (to rhyme with “lute”)—a contribution roundly applauded by the team. What is valuable to note here is that this unlikely collaborative environment fostered the significant influence of hip-hop—an art form not traditionally associated with Shakespeare—on the creation of a new Shakespeare departure. This afforded the project a unique path towards discussing contemporary concerns, and a custom-made creation process that stimulated input from the artistic team in unexpected ways. In the same way that *Titus Bouffonius* collaboratively syncretized Shakespeare text with bouffon, *Black Fly* was able to harness collaboration and use hip-hop as a vehicle for exploring—and, to a degree, subverting—aspects of the source material.

2. Fidelity

A pervasive and recurring discussion that occupied much of the exploration and inquiry of both projects turned on the idea of fidelity. Fidelity discourse, or the extent to which an adaptation “reflects a faithful understanding of its source” (Johnson 101), has traditionally been a primary concern for any adapter seeking to stay “true” to the text. Yet there is a growing interest in contemporary adaptation theory in freeing Shakespeare from the confines of fidelity discourse, and in proposing new models of understanding and interpreting adaptation in relation to prior works. Douglas Lanier goes so far as to suggest that Shakespeare studies is at a crossroads, and that “we are in an age of post-fidelity” where the central idea of “the original text” is deservedly an area of conjecture (“Shakespearean Rhizomatics” 22). He endorses the popular trope of the rhizome, “a vast web of adaptations, allusions and (re)productions that comprises the ever-changing cultural phenomenon we call ‘Shakespeare’” (29). However, Sujata Iyengar in *Shakespeare and Adaptation Theory* interrogates the popular botanical metaphor of adaptation—a “fruit” that has grown from a singular seed—as an idea that still “privileges a mythical originary and superior text and judges adaptations according to their faithfulness to this imagined prior, truth-bearing text” (26), a metaphor echoed in Cohn’s image of the “offshoot” (Cohn 3). Iyengar counters the rhizome metaphor with a model of a Shakespearean “diaspora,” which frames the works as seeds dispersed widely, without direct contact with any one source (34). Such progressive frameworks seek to interrogate

the seemingly linear hierarchy of adaptation and to scrutinize the spatial image of an adaptation's proximity to a source material. Indeed, objective assessment of both *Titus Bouffonius* and *Black Fly* as *products* would situate them comfortably in a rhizomatic model. Nonetheless, to appreciate the actual *process* of creating these departures—processes that carefully considered and (to some degree) privileged *Titus Andronicus* as a source material—applying analysis based on conventional fidelity discourse provides more appropriate and accurate pictures of how the works were created. Each departure involved negotiating fidelity as a proximity to the source material—both in terms of content (as when an adaptation reflects the source's theme, goals, or aims) and form (as when an adaptation follows the source material's plot or dramatic structure). The playwrights started with professed uncertainties about fidelity and each process involved considerable debate around answering the question, "How loyal must we be to Shakespeare?" This question had different objectives and outcomes for each project.

Titus Bouffonius aimed to follow the core story of the hypotext—albeit presented by autonomous characters, thus creating a play-within-a-play structure. The first draft of the script was shared in a staged reading with an invited audience, and it included a substantial amount of unaltered Shakespeare text. Colleen recalls at first "trying to be loyal to the long, long, long line of the story" (Murphy, Personal interview), and feeling a sort of cultural pressure to preserve as much of Shakespeare's text as possible. The early staged reading was encouraging but lacked the giddy excitement conjured both by the bun-throwing class presentation that Colleen witnessed and by the improvisational exercises in rehearsal. Departure manifested only in the framing device of the bouffons performing Shakespeare and had not yet permeated their script. An early piece of dramaturgical feedback I gave to Colleen was that we needed *less* Shakespeare.

"There are moments when I watch a Shakespeare production where it makes me feel stupid. And I think sometimes that's because there's something that *can* be explored that has not been explored before" (Mackie). This sentiment—expressed here by Pippa Mackie, the actor who played Leap/Lavinia—stood as a reminder that we had an opportunity to try new things, to get out from under any affirmative, loyal expectations that hung in the air when engaging with Shakespeare's work. We realized that the entry point to the new direction lay in what the bouffon characters—who had taken on lives of their own—*wanted* to do. We returned to the rehearsal hall to continue our training and experiments; this time,

however, rather than prepare the bouffons to speak Shakespeare text, we listened to how the bouffons would do it themselves. We invited the actors to improvise as their bouffon characters and to find a way to tell the story of *Titus Andronicus*. The result was substantially less Shakespeare text and considerably more profanity (the bouffons took to humping each other in the middle of the speeches), as well as character intricacies that made the narrative as much about the bouffons as it was about Shakespeare's characters. This experimenting inspired Colleen to do as much curation as playwrighting as she incorporated rehearsal discoveries into the script: "There was kind of like fumbling about in a kind of interesting way [. . .] the text seemed to come out of the workshop with the actors clowning much more than it came out of me as the writer" (Murphy, Personal interview). All the same, this workflow, which endured throughout the creation process, did not completely jettison the hypotext, nor was the core narrative fully abandoned. Given the subversive (and scatological) inclinations of the bouffon, Shakespeare was still very present in the process. For Colleen, finding the right degree of fidelity was very important: "I felt that, if [we] totally just took the *Titus* story and didn't care what happened, like where it went, like just went off course with it, that that wouldn't be what I wanted to offer the audience" (Murphy, Personal interview).

Conversations surrounding the question of fidelity took a very different shape in the development process for *Black Fly*. Unlike *Titus Bouffonius*, which followed the narrative line of the source material, *Black Fly* created a new narrative arc that departed from the hypotext at the halfway point, with new character motivations and different approaches to the language. It never had any aspirations of being faithful to the source *per se*, as it purposefully subverted Shakespeare's play. The key concern that related to fidelity, however, was in how this departure relied (in varying degrees) on narrative information provided in the first half of the source material. *Black Fly* began as a story "in progress" and an audience would benefit from this information. For us, the question in the creation process thus became "Can we or should we faithfully relate to the audience the events and details of the first half of Shakespeare's play?" We needed to know how beholden we were to those particulars, and a strong pull towards fidelity reflected our interest in making the departure as narratively clear as we could. Although I suggested above that *Black Fly* has much in common with Cohn's offshoot of "transformation," it was not a sequel to *Titus Andronicus* in that it did not accompany Shakespeare characters through "a non-Shakespearean future" (44). It was irrevocably tethered

to its source and as such needed to support—and be supported by—the events of the first half of the hypotext.

Negotiating the degree of fidelity came back to the collaborative process and to conversations and exercises with the core creative team, as well as with several cohorts of actors who were recruited for various development workshops. Across this collection of artists was a range of expertise with Shakespeare's canon and familiarities with *Titus Andronicus*. When one actor asked, "So, who is Bassianus?" we knew the script contained some potential red herrings (Bassianus was killed in the first half of the source material) that either needed to be explained or eliminated. Invariably, some of the artists who had a working familiarity with the source material were very comfortable with a certain absence of exposition, because they were drawing on their own prior knowledge of *Titus Andronicus* to understand *Black Fly*. If a familiarity was necessary to understand the new play, however, this invited the question "Should we provide it?" Inspired in part by the practice found in serialized television of providing a "previously on" montage at the beginning of a new episode, a "prologue" was constructed featuring a hip-hop speech from Aaron (with an accompanying beat track) that aimed to get the audience up to speed on the details of the play. Amy Lee and Omari knew that they had to judiciously curate the expositional information in this rap prologue to access the frustration, anger, and subversion that drove them to adapt in the first place. The result was a functional imbrication of Shakespeare with hip-hop that aimed to represent the viscera of the source, as demonstrated in this excerpt from the prologue:

At Olympus top we're scheming, every day we're locked on dreaming
 Wandering searching for meaning, kettle went from hot to steaming
 With sweet words, heard from their mother's mouth lavished,
 Tamora the puppet master pushed her kids to ravish,
 Titus daughter, silenced by violence the family earned.
 Tongue and limbs chopped off so a lesson would be learned.
 They looked at me and my kind as lower than common swine.
 These racists would displace an innocent black fly.
 By delegating my evil deeds my fortune's now switched,
 I'm celebrating, relegating Titus to my BITCH—. (Lavoie and Newton 3)

In terms of fidelity to the details of the source material, Amy Lee explains that "[i]t's about giving [the audience] enough context for the container we're presenting without binding them to knowledge they might not have to understand the action of the play that we're experiencing. So that, to me, is how I'm honoring the source material" (Lavoie).

3. *Reclamation*

The beginning of Omari's journey with the departure that became *Black Fly* was prompted by a personal agenda. Remembering an unsatisfying professional experience in which he himself played Aaron in a production of *Titus Andronicus*, Omari was compelled to delve into a conversation about race in Shakespeare. *Black Fly* thus started as an effort to reappropriate and reclaim Aaron's narrative:

I understood why this super intelligent Black man—who had to deal with unspeakable racism and the destruction of his people—why he would want revenge. So, to me, I thought it was an exciting opportunity to make my statement about what Aaron's potential motivations were. (Newton)

For Omari, this was about exploring an unmined aspect of Shakespeare's work, and about the opportunity to harness an established narrative to reclaim a part of it. Envisioning an adaptation of *Titus Andronicus* with Aaron the Moor as a central protagonist was a way to “counterbalance those earlier univocal narratives” (Burnett 79) that have ultimately served to affirm white patriarchal expectations. This “counterbalancing” is similarly found in how the playwrights chose to approach Lavinia: as an underserved, silenced, and misunderstood character who—given the proper platform and opportunity—could speak to contemporary concerns and ideas:

The characters who had little-to-zero power, we're giving them the power in the play. And we're [. . .] reappropriating the violence and giving the violence back to the characters who didn't have it. (Lavoie)

In Shakespeare's play, Lavinia, having been robbed of her ability to vocalize, rescues the narrative from an inert depression when her ingenuity with her uncle's staff allows her to identify her rapists by scratching their names in the dirt. This event launches Titus into a renewed and focused revenge ploy, and yields a dramatically rich series of events ending in the inevitable bloodbath: “Sometimes patriarchal culture needs and wants female speech—of a certain kind under certain conditions” (Detmer-Goebel 75). *Black Fly*, in effect, responds to the two-part question “What happens to the narrative if Aaron's voice is heard differently *and* if Lavinia gets her actual voice back?”

For Aaron, this meant a meaningful investment in language; for Lavinia, it meant an exploration of satire and an irreverent response to *Titus Andronicus*'s violent bombast, which in *Black Fly* manifested in dark and

extreme humor. In the first scene of *Black Fly*, while Titus and Marcus enjoy an abundant but slowly rotting feast and enumerate the impossibly heroic ways in which they would like to mete out revenge, the mute and ravaged Lavinia—with the help of her cousin, Young Lucius—commandeers a suckling pig from the dinner table, pulls out its tongue, and sews it into her mouth, thus restoring her ability to speak. Having failed to alert her father and uncle as to the identities of her assailants (as they continued a childish military roleplay with the vegetables from their plates), she takes it upon herself to seek out justice. She later convinces the prurient and imbecilic Chiron and Demetrius that the process for experiencing a rare and euphoric “phantom blowjob” is to sever one’s own penis. After they enthusiastically oblige and inevitably bleed out, Lavinia affixes their detached, limp members onto her bloody arm stumps in an act of mockery. The extremity of these acts was inspired by an impulse to reclaim power stolen from Lavinia in the source material and as a response to a COVID-19 era of caution and (at times) panic. As Amy Lee comments,

[During the pandemic] I had no room for any kind of earnestness. All I had was me meeting the world with the same level of absurdity that I was getting back. So, the weight of the play sits in the sense of humor and what it’s saying. And how it’s saying it, I think, could only have existed or been created in that specific pocket of time. (Lavoie)

A significant conversation during the process focused on the character of Tamora and how her narrative would play out in concert with Aaron’s, and especially with Lavinia’s. We had accepted that the patriarchs of the plot—Titus, Marcus, Saturninus—would all arrive at a pathetic and comic end in the departure (they collectively died of heart attacks during an attempted juvenile display of physical prowess), but what kind of new direction did Tamora—the “ravenous tiger”—deserve, and might she also have a narrative worthy of reclamation? When we scrutinized the commonalities between Lavinia and Aaron—the repurposed protagonists of the departure—we started to see that Shakespeare’s *dramatis personae* split into a seeming binary of “privileged” and “other,” and that our departure could seek to reclaim the narratives of the “others.” I had suggested to the group that we consider the “otherness” of the Goths in terms of how they are perceived by the nobility of Rome: as savage, barbarous, and amoral. I acknowledge that an Elizabethan audience might have had a more nuanced perspective on Germanic peoples than this black and white model (see, for example, Broude 27). However, the dramaturgy of *Titus Andronicus* is unambiguous: Goths are not Roman, and thus they are not

like “us.” This discussion opened an exciting new narrative thread that allowed Lavinia to forgive Tamora, and to subsequently invite her to join the cause that Lavinia and Aaron had undertaken to literally burn Rome down and to build a new one. I would argue that this unlikely alliance was (ironically) the most significant departure from the source material in terms of character composition, and one that yielded unexpected results towards narrative reclamation. As Omari says, “It adds a layer of complexity to it: actually, this was *another* marginalized person who was also subjugated by Rome” (Newton).

Although some scholarship suggests that counter-discursive adaptation measures such as reframing narratives from the perspective of marginalized voices often amounts to a criticism of and reaction *against* Shakespeare (Eward-Mangione 147; Carney 4–5), Linda Burnett proposes an alternative perspective based on the practice of playwrights who assume an “affectionate tone” with the source material (80). Acts of adaptation and appropriation that parody Shakespeare’s plays, argues Burnett, contribute to a constructive body of work whose “goal is not to vanquish earlier stories, even those that have been told from the perspective of the colonizer. Rather it is to advance narratives to stand beside (in addition to) earlier narratives” (79). However subversive and profane the narrative approach in *Black Fly* might seem, the creation and development of the play came from a place of joy and affection. As Omari reflects, “Both Amy and I quite love and enjoy and respect Shakespeare’s writing. I think we want to honor the original text. Even when we’re satirizing [it]” (Newton). Additionally, the playwrights’ interests in exploring the psychologies of Aaron and Lavinia created an appreciation for the potential of these characters’ robust emotional inner lives. Along with the desire to satirize the source, this second interest exemplifies how the departure concerned itself with both “narrative rupture and psychological depth—two quintessential markers of twentieth-century storytelling” (Henderson 26).

Since *Black Fly* began with the premise of creating an alternative second half of *Titus Andronicus*, the pursuit of rewriting and reclaiming narratives followed naturally. With an attentive eye on the ground rules laid by the first half of the hypotext and our ongoing negotiation about how to honor these guidelines, we could suggest and play out new narrative threads for marginalized characters. The process of arriving at an act of reclamation in *Titus Bouffonius*, however, was very different. While it was similarly subversive and profane in relation to its source material, unlike *Black Fly* it operated with a commitment to the core narrative thread that runs through *Titus Andronicus*, and was intended to be received *as a*

departure, as a work that “signals a relationship with an informing source-text or original” (Sanders 26) and invites the receiver to compare hypotext with hypertext. In this adaptation/departure, we knew that—however the narrative arrived there—everyone would die in the end, there would be a pie made of sons, and Lavinia would lose her tongue and hands (and not get them back). Reclaiming her narrative did not initially present itself as an option or goal.

However, as the process evolved and we recognized the development of the bouffons’ personalities, we started to see exciting new opportunities. While the characters had throughlines that reflected those of the hypotext, the bouffons (who were playing these characters) had other concerns that intermittently sabotaged and interrupted the performance. These multiple layers of narrative recall Manfred Pfister’s model of a mediating communication system in which a “narrative medium” is occupied by autonomous figures (in this case, the bouffons) that facilitate the delivery of the narrative (3). When we saw that the bouffons had autonomous voices distinct from the Shakespeare characters they were portraying, and that they could potentially step out of the narrative to comment on both the play and other issues, an opportunity to reclaim that narrative—specifically for Lavinia—became apparent.

After the scene in which Lavinia is raped and mutilated (played off-stage and accompanied by evocative vocals), Pippa would wrap red duct tape around her hands to create the image of stumps. When she reentered, she spat a bloody, gelatinous, silicone prop tongue at the feet of the audience and tried to communicate to them what had happened. Her dialogue for the rest of the play—as is common with portrayals of Lavinia—was a series of grunts and moans, unintelligible to other characters. Pippa recalls contemplating Lavinia’s plight: “Her hands and her tongue were cut out. And then that was who she was the rest of the play. She didn’t say very much anymore. And I remember asking ‘Well, is that the goal with Lavinia? [. . .] Is there some sort of power reclamation that she can have later on in the play?’” (Mackie). These questions prompted a search for an answer. We considered how the interests of Pippa, Leap, and Lavinia might intersect in a newly created “performance objective” (Escolme 16), what that reclamation might look like, and how it would manifest coming from Leap.

As always, Colleen was inspired by the flexibility and accommodating nature of Shakespeare’s work to new ideas and interpretations—what Emma Smith refers to as its “sheer and permissive gappiness” (2). We envisioned an opportunity for Leap to provide a voice to the mute Lavinia,

to access Lavinia's rage and to comment on the horrible assault that she suffered. After identifying her assailants to her father (in this adaptation by reaching between her legs, extracting a soaked tampon, and writing names on the floor in blood), she speaks to the audience, literally and temporarily finding her voice:

LEAP. (*as Lavinia, struggles to speak with no tongue*) eye odd-ee is-ent er odd-ee . . . my body isn't your body—nothing in the whole world gives you the right to touch my body—I'm the only one who gives you that right 'cuz I'm the Boss of My Body—the only right you have is to bow and say, "Majestic Boss, could I touch your body" an' if I say yeah then you can touch my breasts, kiss my nipples, but those two fucker-heads didn't have any right to touch me so as punishment from me—the Boss—I'm sending out this order: Before those boys are crucified I'm gonna cut their cocks off an' shove 'em down their throats then make 'em sing "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" while they're bleeding out an' I'm gonna sue that thunder-cunting Queen for encouraging her sons to rape me! (Murphy, *The Society for the Destitute* 64)

The consistent, recurring gesture during the process of making *Titus Bouffonius* was being open and receptive to surprises. Many of the discoveries and decisions made for performance evolved out of a required sense of fearlessness—of jumping first and building our parachute on the way down. As an artist, I had to trust the elusive hunch that might be shared and accepted by the creative team. That was the only way to unearth opportunities and performance highlights such as Leap's powerful reclamation. Even though she still dies in the end, she is able in this moment to lay an important claim to the narrative without simply being an accessory to someone else's.

Conclusions

As a theater practitioner whose business is the creation and presentation of necessarily ephemeral work, I am keenly invested in discussions about process. Linda Hutcheon's "double definition of adaptation as process and product" (9) allows a necessary temporal dimension to understanding adaptation, and Margaret Jane Kidnie's perspective even eschews the notion of "product" in *any* play creation: "a play, for all that it carries the rhetorical and ideological force of an enduring stability, is not an object at all, but rather a dynamic process that evolves over time in response to the needs and sensibilities of its users" (2). My goal with this article has been to outline an approach to understanding how process manifests



Fig. 2. Leap (Pippa Mackie), in *The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius*, dir. Stephen Drover. Rumble Theatre, 2017. Photograph by Tim Matheson, courtesy of Rumble Theatre.

in the work between artists when they are attempting to depart from a known source text. That approach will itself necessarily evolve and adapt.

Shakespeare adaptation has a complicated relationship to time, bravely pushing forward with new perspectives, yet inexorably (and, perhaps, comfortingly) tethered to the past. Process analysis is a commitment to understanding how adaptation—itsself as a process—exists in the *present*: how do things come together in the room between artists that might result in an imperfect iteration of the work? How do we stand firm where we are, hold the hands of our collaborators (including Shakespeare), and step bravely towards the departure gate? I pursued this inquiry out of a lack of an obvious practical analytical framework for Shakespeare adaptation process. While it is proving to be useful in my professional practice as I collaborate on a variety of projects, and while I hope that it might break through the membrane of my personal experience to help others

calibrate *their* processes, I acknowledge the necessity of the transient nature of the framework. Like a play, which changes over time depending on the needs of the user, my observations are based primarily in my evolving experiences of developing new Shakespeare adaptations. As my practice responds to the many insights afforded by collaboration in the rehearsal room, I look forward to discovering different points of departure that might slingshot my process onto new paths.

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