The Canadian television show *Slings and Arrows* (2003-06) dramatizes the struggle between art and commercialism by opening its first episode with visions of two very different theatres. The first, called “Theatre Sans Argent,” operates out of a dismal warehouse, in which the artistic director, Geoffrey Tennant (Paul Gross), is unclogging a toilet. After fixing the plumbing, he passionately explicates the opening scene of *The Tempest* to his cast but is interrupted mid-monologue by the lights going out. This theatre sans argent, or without money, explicitly contrasts the first image of the New Burbage Theatre Festival: a ringing cash register in the gift shop. Smiling patrons buy stuffed animals and mugs, while cardboard cutouts of Shakespeare welcome shoppers; administrator Anna Conroy (Susan Coyne) hurries up the wide golden staircase in the beautiful lobby. The Shakespearean productions in each theatre also could not be more different. Geoffrey believes that theatres do not need money: “a theatre is an empty space,” in which the power of his genius can conjure up a compelling storm scene for *The Tempest*. New Burbage artistic director, Oliver Welles (Stephen Ouimette) lackadaisically stages his umpteenth *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, more concerned with getting a cheap laugh from some mechanical bleating sheep than with effectively directing Titania’s “forgeries of jealousy” speech.¹ These two contrasting visions of theatrical production communicate that art and commercialism are incompatible and that “good” Shakespeare is (unsurprisingly) associated with art, not money.

*Slings and Arrows* portrays Shakespeare (and the theatre more generally) as being constantly under threat from lazy and talentless directors and actors, who approach the texts with their own agendas and wrong-headed interpretations, who focus too much on box office, and who do not respect the Author. Oliver is a director who used to have integrity but has sold out in favor of “accessibility.” His *Midsummer Night’s Dream* is “dreadful,” as he himself realizes:
“Oh god, there’s not one moment of truth in this whole production” (1.1). The local theatre critic, Basil (Sean Cullen), confirms his response, telling him in pseudo-complimentary fashion, “You’ve got a style that with age I’ve grown to love. You don’t make demands of the audience. You soothe them. Your shows are comfortable. Like an old boot.” Although “the production values are very high,” and the show contains abbreviated soliloquies and a Puck who tosses fairy dust, Oliver realizes that he has betrayed his ideals. Drunkenly disillusioned after the cast party, he passes out in the middle of the street and is killed by a truck. At his funeral, Geoffrey gives an impassioned speech that reinforces the perception of Oliver as a sell-out:

For a time there was a kind of electricity in this place that I haven’t experienced anywhere else because Oliver made us believe that what we did had meaning. He made us believe that love could be rekindled, that regimes could be toppled by the simple act of telling a story with truth. A ridiculous ambition. But it was a beautiful idea … Now it’s all gone to shit. Of course we know what really matters is that the cash registers keep ringing and that the tourists keep streaming through the gift shop, and when I look around at the wreck that this theatre’s become under Oliver’s reign, I’m reminded of those words from Macbeth, “If thou couldst, doctor, cast / The water of my land, find her disease, / And purge it to a sound and pristine health, / I would applaud thee to the very echo.” (1.2)

His quotation from Macbeth associates him with Shakespeare/real art, and Oliver with commercialism/bad art. Yet his speech also conveys the idea that the Festival, despite its financial responsibilities, has the potential to create great art if its directors emphasize “truth” and “simplicity.” Due in part to this speech, Geoffrey replaces Oliver as interim artistic director of the Festival. Under his leadership, the power of Shakespeare will once more reign at New Burbage, and his productions of Hamlet and Macbeth demonstrate that commercially successful theatre can also be artistically valuable.

The New Burbage Festival, located in a provincial Ontario town, echoes the Stratford Shakespeare Festival of Canada, despite the producers’ insistence that it does not “emulat[e] any pre-existing theatre festival.” By staging the ongoing struggle between art and commerce, the series addresses the central issue faced by Stratford’s former artistic director, Richard Monette, who led the company from 1994 to 2007. As Peter Parolin has observed, Monette created “a financially healthy Festival” but his detractors saw it as “a smug institution that subordinated artistic risk to ideological complacency and box office lust.” Although Oliver is not modeled on Monette (at least officially), he faces similar challenges, and it is clear in Slings and Arrows’ opening episode that he, like Monette, has chosen to “make the classics accessible and to generate the revenue to keep the theatres running.” The series as a whole presents the clash between art and commercialism as a battle for control between Geoffrey and the Festival’s managing director Richard Smith-Jones (Mark
McKinney). Shakespeare is at the center of this debate, characterized as essential because of his artistic value by Geoffrey and his supporters, and as irrelevant due to his lack of commercial appeal by Richard and his allies. By the end of Season Three, commercialism wins over art: Geoffrey’s production of *King Lear* is canceled, and he is forced to resign, while Richard assumes control of the Festival thanks to his wildly successful production of a new musical. As Robert Ormsby observes, the series provides an “elegiac depiction of classical theatre surrendering to commercialization.”

Despite this narrative trajectory depicting the decline of Shakespeare at the New Burbage Festival, I argue that *Slings and Arrows* ultimately champions Shakespearean authority; that is, it advocates the value, importance, and cultural power of Shakespeare and his plays.

Scholars have thoroughly debunked the idea of an authoritative Shakespeare, particularly by demonstrating that there are no definitive or stable versions of his plays on which to base performance interpretations. Yet, as W. B. Worthen has observed, “The sense that performance transmits Shakespearean authority remains very much in play … For despite the ‘death of the author’ … ‘Shakespeare’ – sometimes coded as the ‘text,’ its ‘genre,’ or the ‘theatre’ itself – remains an apparently indispensable category for preparing, interpreting, and evaluating theatrical performance.”

Barbara Hodgdon concurs, arguing that “in spite of the widespread acknowledgement of the fluid status of Shakespeare’s text[s] … literary culture maintains a vested interest in keeping performed Shakespeare ‘true’ to an authorizing authority.” The idea of an authoritative Shakespeare, although mythical, nonetheless retains a significant amount of cultural power. This authority presupposes an incontrovertible link between Shakespeare and high art. Douglas Lanier articulates (but does not endorse) this Bardolatrous view, which proposes that “Shakespeare is aesthetically refined, timeless, complex and intellectually challenging, concerned with lasting truths of the human condition and not fleeting political issues, addressed to those willing to devote themselves to laborious study, produced by a single genius ‘not of an age but for all time’.” As to *Slings and Arrows*, I contend that the show, like many other contemporary performances and adaptations of Shakespeare, relies on and perpetuates the perception of his plays as inherently valuable and presents as its central characters directors and actors who locate their work under the sign of Shakespearean authority. The series and its characters need the mythic ideal of Shakespeare to claim legitimacy for their work, both within the series’ narratives and outside of them.

In addition to placing Shakespeare firmly on the side of art, the series also proposes that there is a particular kind of artistic interpretation that honors Shakespearean authority. The “right way” to do Shakespeare emphasizes personal connection with the texts and emotional realism, an extension of what Kim Solga calls “Festival realism,…in which early modern characters are created by actors and presented to audiences as ‘real’ people with late modern motivations and psychological frameworks.” Emotional realism strives to create an emotionally authentic experience for both actors and audiences alike, not only by a presentation of coherent characters in performance but through a shared exploration of what Shakespeare’s plays can teach us about ourselves. The series discredits directorial concepts, experimentation, and
overly methodological approaches to Shakespeare as failing to honor Author and Text. As Worthen notes, this is a common concern among theatre reviewers, who often "dismiss[s] a ‘conceptual’ production as merely trendy, somehow not faithful to the intentions of Shakespeare and/or his play."\textsuperscript{13} Rather, directors must strip away the trappings of commercialism, sublimate their own views, and show actors how to connect on an emotional and personal level with the text. \textit{As Slings and Arrows} is a series about specifically Canadian approaches to Shakespeare, these views are perhaps unsurprising, as such a reverential approach to Shakespeare is particularly prevalent in Canada and other postcolonial cultures. As Denis Salter argues, Canadian actors have tended to assume "that it is they who must adapt themselves to Shakespeare, not Shakespeare who must adapt himself to them."\textsuperscript{14} Respecting Shakespearean authority and striving for emotional realism allow the "real Shakespeare" to be revealed, and the audience will be drawn in and emotionally affected in turn. \textit{Slings and Arrows} postulates that Shakespeare does not need anything onstage except emotionally honest performances. Only through active, truthful, sensitive engagement with the texts can Shakespeare come alive for the audience.

Geoffrey typifies this approach to Shakespeare, and the centerpieces of \textit{Slings and Arrows} are his productions of \textit{Hamlet} in Season One, \textit{Macbeth} in Season Two, and \textit{King Lear} in Season Three. The edited highlights we see from each production serve to illustrate the series’ conception of how Shakespeare should be approached and performed. The series also contains numerous examples of "bad" Shakespeare and "bad" acting, which are placed alongside Geoffrey’s "real" and "good" Shakespearean performances. Further, all three of Geoffrey’s productions contain moments of conversion for insensitive audience members previously unconvinced of Shakespeare’s authority. While we see a kind of “greatest hits” version of each play that foregrounds particular well-known lines and scenes, we also see numerous shots of audience members responding to what is happening onstage, and they are nearly always emotionally engaged. Only those spectators who are considered morally bankrupt fail to respond appropriately to the power and passion of Geoffrey’s (and Shakespeare’s) work. Cary Mazer identifies several tropes of “the genre of rehearsals-of-a-Shakespeare-production-within-a-film,” two of which are applicable here: “One is that Shakespeare is depicted as redemptive, for actors and audiences alike,” while the other is that “the actors must learn something about themselves in order to identify emotionally with the parts they are playing; and having done so, they then learn something more about themselves from the very act of playing the part.” He argues that the central concept in \textit{Slings and Arrows} is the term “transformation,” which describes “both the actor’s process of becoming the character and the effect the plays have on their audiences.”\textsuperscript{15} Thus, Geoffrey’s work is endowed with the power to convert reluctant actors, directors, and spectators to Shakespeare, allowing them to redeem and transform themselves through close emotional identification with Shakespeare.

Although the process of rehearsing and performing Shakespeare is one of the focal points of the series, Shakespeare permeates the offstage personal lives of the characters as well. \textit{Slings and Arrows} cleverly adapts the plots and characters of the three central plays, so that each
season is replete with references to and reenactments of *Hamlet, Macbeth, and Lear*. Geoffrey, for instance, is always on some level the main character of the play he directs, struggling with madness and identity in ways similar to the Shakespearean protagonists. Richard, too, contends with crises in his personal and professional life that are filtered through the experiences of Hamlet, Macbeth, and Lear, particularly in his vexed relationship to power and control. As I demonstrate, the series adapts these three plays to bolster Shakespearean authority, proposing that the struggles of Shakespeare’s characters are applicable to all of the characters’ lives and, by implication, the lives of the television viewers as well.

For Geoffrey and Richard, their inward, personal struggles are compounded by outward, institutional struggles, returning consistently to the central battle between art and commerce. The series implies that large theatrical institutions like New Burbage (and the Stratford Festival) have the power to resolve the tension between art and commerce by creating productions that are both authentically Shakespearean and commercially successful. The former ensures the latter, as we see with Geoffrey’s productions of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* in Seasons One and Two: if they build it, the audience will come. Such productions are rare, however, as *Slings and Arrows* also demonstrates, because they demand that the director sublimate his own identity as an artist in order to honor Shakespeare, the long-dead artist. Only Geoffrey is able to accomplish this feat, and the series contrasts him with one of its funniest characters, Darren Nichols (Don McKellar), a self-important director brimming with avant-garde ideas. Darren’s most uproarious moments come out of his attempts to burden Shakespeare’s plays with high-minded production concepts intended to attract an audience, which inevitably fail, and are replaced by Geoffrey’s ethos of simplicity and emotional honesty. The two characters therefore serve as a demonstration of the power of Shakespearean authority over shallow commercial pandering. Yet the series masks the fact that Geoffrey’s approach to Shakespeare is just as much a directorial concept as Darren’s; instead, it presents the idea that Geoffrey’s emphasis on emotional realism is the only way of accessing the “truth” at the heart of the plays.

Richard vacillates between the views of Geoffrey and Darren. As the managing director, he is responsible for the financial health of the Festival and is interested in building the theatre as a business. (One of his proudest moments comes in Season Three, when he appears on the cover of *Canadian Business* magazine.) Yet he is also an aspiring artist, who yearns for a role in creating theatrical productions. In particular, Richard is a devotee of musical theatre and questions the authority of Shakespeare in Season One in a conversation with Holly Day (Jennifer Irwin), a new board member from the Festival’s biggest corporate sponsor. The two have just been to see *Mamma Mia!* in Toronto, and Richard is electrified. “I understood every word!” he exclaims.

**RICHARD:** I’m so tired of hearing “It’s a dense play, it’s a difficult play.” I’ve never seen anyone come dancing and singing out of the Swan [Theatre] like we just did.

**HOLLY:** I know, and why do you think that is?
RICHARD: Because it’s Shakespeare, Shakespeare’s like –
HOLLY: Four hundred years old!
RICHARD: Yeah, and I don’t think he was that good! There, I said it! … I don’t like Shakespeare.
HOLLY: Nobody does, Richard! You put on plays that nobody wants to see. God, what a waste. (1.3)

Of course, Slings and Arrows does not endorse this view of Shakespeare; as L. Monique Pittman observes, the dialogue between Richard and Holly encapsulates “the very attitude towards Shakespeare the series aims to combat.”18 Unlike Geoffrey, who is repeatedly shown grappling with the deeper meanings of Shakespeare’s texts, Richard is unwilling to engage intellectually with the “dense” and “difficult” plays, preferring instead the accessible delights of musical theatre. Yet the series does present Richard as a complex character, one who is inconsistent in his allegiance to commercialism. In Season One he acts under the negative influence of Holly, who is, perhaps predictably, American, and hails from the Houston, Texas corporate headquarters, which here comes to represent a soulless emphasis on the bottom line. As Laurie E. Osborne argues, “the first season identifies the threat to Shakespeare … as American entrepreneurship.”19 In one of the series’ many witty adaptations of Shakespearean plotlines, Holly acts as Claudius to Richard’s Gertrude, seducing him into endorsing a corporate takeover of the Festival. He looks the other way as Holly’s actions put the idealistic chair of the board into a coma, allowing her to assume control of the board herself. Richard also seems about to consent to her new vision for the Festival as “Shakespeareville,” which she describes as follows:

It’s a dream of a theatrical wonderland where middle-income families can come and enjoy the world of theatre in a non-threatening atmosphere of accessibility and comfort. It’s a dream of theme hotels and fudge shops with clerks in costumes and high-quality big-budget theatrical productions. Three stages running touring productions of Broadway’s hottest hits twice daily. An expanded and modernized mainstage facility devoted exclusively to musicals, and two smaller stages for those who like the classics. (1.5)

Holly’s plan for “the Disneyfication of New Burbage” would, despite its name, sideline Shakespeare to a “smaller stage,” while privileging Oliver’s byword of “accessibility” (1.5).21 As in Hamlet, however, the performance of a play stimulates a change of heart. Richard is deeply inspired by watching Geoffrey’s revelatory production of Hamlet, and, like Gertrude in the “closet scene,” becomes convinced that Holly/Claudius is “a really terrible, terrible person” (1.6). Geoffrey/Hamlet is able, through the power of his art, to make Richard/Gertrude see the truth, enabling him to reject Holly/Claudius and the corporate mindset that she represents.

Richard’s idealism is short-lived, however, as the series shows how the demands of running a
large theatrical institution necessitate a continual concern with financial matters, when in Season Two he is forced to refocus on profit. The Festival is in the red, so he applies for a two million dollar government loan to hire a marketing firm for “rebranding.” The firm he hires, Frog Hammer, employs decidedly unorthodox working methods, and its leader, Sanjay (Colm Feore) acts as an unhinged guru to inspire Richard’s creative side. Sanjay and his staff pigeonhole Richard as “the money” at the Festival but observe that, “he’s not comfortable with that … [He is] an insecure man, a man desperate to please, an unhappy man” (2.2). As they observe, Richard is having an identity crisis: like Macbeth, he is tempted by ambition but conflicted by his own desire for power. (“Who am I?” he literally sobs to Anna in Season Three. “Who is Richard Smith-Jones?” [3.1]). He is not an artist (despite his attempts in Season Three to become part of the musical production), but he is also not committed to being “the money.” His character typifies the complex relationship between art and commerce explored by the series as a whole, revealing the difficulty in reconciling the two into a harmonious union. Richard ultimately gives up the struggle and decides by the end of the series to choose box office over artistic integrity.

Richard’s choice is, of course, the wrong one based on the logic that governs the series: an ethos that is firmly grounded in Shakespearean authority. As Pittman writes, *Slings and Arrows* treats Shakespeare “with a reverential awe” and celebrates his language “with an old-fashioned enthusiasm that remains just shy of Bardolatry.” Anna, an administrator who combines practicality with sensitivity, tells Richard, “You came so close … [t]o becoming a human being. But you lost your soul. And now you’re just a fool” (3.6). The last image of Richard confirms her interpretation: it is a point of view shot of Richard from the door of his office, as he sits alone foolishly contemplating a pencil, unable to write or create anything meaningful of his own. Richard’s isolation and dehumanization recall the parallels with Macbeth, particularly the end of the play:

My way of life
Is fall’n into the sere, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,
As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have, but in their stead
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath
Which the poor heart would fain deny and dare not.23

Like Macbeth, Richard “loses his soul” because he chooses ambition and power and ends up alone. The series also suggests that Richard fails because he chooses musical theatre over Shakespeare; that is, he is unable to tell “bad art” from “good art.” Musical theatre is intrinsically “bad” because, like all bad theatre, it is overly commercial. Darren’s enthusiasm for musicals conveys this characterization; as he tells Geoffrey at the beginning of Season Three, “I must say, I’ve fallen in love with the musical genre. It’s the art form of the common man. If you want to communicate something to the proletariat, cover it in sequins and make
it sing. It’s noisy, vulgar, and utterly meaningless – I love it” (3.1). He patronizingly assumes that audiences love musicals because they are easily accessible, with no hidden meanings beneath the surface. In this formulation, musicals are bad art because they reveal nothing deep or meaningful about the human condition. Similarly, “bad acting” lacks realism because it is emotionally disconnected from the text. Sling and Arrows shows Geoffrey continually struggling with problematic characters who try to undermine Shakespeare, such as Darren in all three seasons and actors performing the roles of Ophelia in Hamlet and the title role in Macbeth. Their mediocrity and incapacity provide a contrast for the formula that the series develops for staging Shakespeare successfully. Only by eschewing the commercial and embracing simplicity, honesty, and emotional realism, the series implicitly argues, can Shakespeare be fully revealed in performance.

Darren is the series’ primary example of an antagonistic and self-focused director who “represents the extremes of directing from a concept rather than the Shakespearean text.”

On his first day of rehearsals for Hamlet in Season One, he outlines his “concept” for the cast:

This play is dead. It has been dead for over 300 years. It has been strip-mined for quotations and propped up like Lenin in his ice cave. I don’t worship dead texts, but that doesn’t mean I don’t find interest in them. Now as to my vision, I’m taking the word “rotten” as in “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” very seriously. I want a rank and foul-looking, foul-acted, and if possible, foul-smelling Hamlet. A decomposed vessel somewhere between the swamp and the sewer … Questions? Okay, let’s read this corpse. (1.3)

Although Darren’s initial inspiration is textual, he is only using a single word to generate his production concept, rather than basing it on an extended reading of the play. Later it becomes clear that his approach is over-loading the play with signifiers: his set is literally laden with junk, he uses pyrotechnics to stage the Ghost scenes, and his signature horses for castle guards in Act 1 Scene 4. His Hamlet, Hollywood star Jack Crew (Luke Kirby) tellingly comments, “I never knew theatre was so much like the movies” (1.3). Darren’s methods display an irreverent attitude towards Shakespeare and Hamlet, questioning the primacy of the author and favoring performative interventions. Despite his challenge to “classical” theatre, however, he is not really an avant-garde director; rather, the series consistently links his productions with commercialism. When considering Darren as a director for Hamlet, Richard notes that, “he directed our Titus in ‘97. I believe it sold quite well.” Geoffrey responds, “That was the one with the horse onstage? … It was shit” (1.3). Darren, rather than being a radical or political director, is simply lazy, seeking sensational effects that will lure audiences.

I characterize Darren as a commercial, rather than avant-garde, director in order to situate the series within larger traditions of critical responses to “Festival Shakespeare.” As scholars of the Stratford Festival have shown, academic and popular critics are usually united in their
condemnation of commercially-minded directors (such as the real-life Monette and the fictional Oliver and Darren) who present “classics stuffed with ‘monkey business’ or ‘slapstick,’” to use Gary Taylor’s words. Solga, writing of Monette’s tenure at Stratford, finds that academic and popular critics likewise concurred that, “the Festival’s commercial focus was dumbing down its fare.” Yet she goes on to note that academics “sought the avant-garde as remedy,” while critics for Canadian newspapers “sought classical (read: realist) interpretations with fewer bells and whistles and more focus on text.” Sling and Arrows sides with the popular critics in its denigration of Oliver and Darren and its reverence for Geoffrey, who (after he ousts Darren and takes over directing Hamlet) tells the cast, “I just happen to believe that this play is the single greatest achievement in Western art.” As Mazer notes, for Geoffrey, unlike Darren, “the theatre is actor-centered, emotionally truthful, and at all times ‘honest,’ both in terms of the actors’ performances and their biographies and temperaments.” Geoffrey is portrayed as mentally unstable and socially challenged; yet, he is also the series’ hero and its ideal of artistic integrity, while Darren is, quite simply, comic.

Although Geoffrey sees Darren off with a rapier fight in Season One, he is back to direct Romeo and Juliet in Season Two. Again, he approaches the play with a complex concept: to examine the signifiers with regards to gender in this text.” He points out to his cast that Juliet, Lady Capulet and the Nurse would originally have been played by men, and talks at length about gender, misogyny, and deconstructing signifiers. Sarah (Joanne Kelly), who is cast as Juliet, looks panicked, particularly when he asks them to do a Barthes-inspired exercise in which she and Patrick (David Alpay), her Romeo, swap roles to read the balcony scene. As she later reveals to Geoffrey, she is afraid she will not get to play the “real” Juliet in Darren’s production: “I love this play. I’ve seen it millions of times. And finally I get to say these beautiful words. But without character or story, these words are just … they’re air. And it’s killing me.” Darren berates her for failing to realize that she is “mired down in [her] own preconceptions of heterosexual love” and for not understanding that “gender identity is more complicated, one might say dynamic” (2.4). Ultimately he directs the actors to play their scenes without looking at or touching each other. “Romeo and Juliet are not real people; they are signifiers,” he tells Sarah, when she protests being made to say her lines without emotion (2.5). By the time they reach the technical rehearsal, Romeo and Juliet are clad in costumes incorporating iron hoops, making it impossible for them to move easily or to get near each other. They look straight ahead and play Act 3 Scene 5 entirely devoid of emotion. As with Hamlet, Geoffrey has to save the day, not by directing the production himself, but by making Darren see the error of his ways. He calls a meeting with Darren and pretends to be zoned out on antidepressants. “I don’t think I can come to your opening,” he tells Darren. “It not you, it’s the play. It’s so full of life, and I can’t feel anything … Are you happy, Darren? … Well, that’s why you can direct this play. I couldn’t take it on. I mean, how could you direct Romeo and Juliet if you’re dead inside? … All you would do is mock it, make some anti-romantic, vaguely condescending shallow fucking commentary on what that play actually is” (2.6). He dissolves into tears, prompting Darren to scrap his entire concept and proclaim to his cast, “I’m not a zombie! I have a soul! I can feel!” (2.6). The revised production is traditional:
flowing white draperies for the balcony scene, with Romeo and Juliet in period costumes providing a passionate interpretation of the characters. Presumably, this is what the play “actually is”: romantic, emotional, with no external concept to interfere with the primacy of Author and Text. As Ben Walsh, Matt Buntin, and Daniel Fischlin note, “It would appear that the author here (Shakespeare) is far from dead, still imagined as the teller of universal truths about the human condition.” Darren’s “imposition” of directorial concepts on Shakespeare provides grounds for discrediting him in the series, while Geoffrey’s respect for the plays – and for emotional “truth” – sets him up as an artistic genius. As Worthen remind us, “directors, far from liberating an authentic Shakespeare, consistently work to authorize their own efforts by locating them under the sign of ‘Shakespeare’.” The series carefully masks the fact that Geoffrey’s approach is also a directorial concept, presenting it instead as the right way to stage Shakespeare.

Geoffrey has to contend with problematic actors over the course of the series as well, primarily those who bring their own approaches to performing Shakespeare that are divorced from emotional realism. Claire (Sabrina Grdevich), the actress originally cast as Ophelia in his Hamlet, decides to use “sense memory” of being stoned to play the mad scenes, since she “can’t take any meaning from the text. Ophelia’s just singing nonsense songs.” Her performance is, unsurprisingly, stilted, false, and ridiculous. Geoffrey, frustrated, tries to explain the scene to her, and reveals his own emotional connection with Ophelia:

Claire … Ophelia is a child. She has been dominated by powerful men all of her life and suddenly they all disappear. Her brother goes to France, her father is murdered by her boyfriend, and he is shipped off to England. She is alone, for the first time, grieving, and heartbroken, and guilty, because, as far as she’s concerned, it’s all her fault. She ignored her brother’s advice and fell in love with Hamlet, and now her father is dead, all because of her, and the pain and the loss and the shame and the guilt, all of this is gnawing away inside this little child’s mind and it comes out as little songs. “And will he not come again? And will he not come again?” [Almost sobbing.] “No, no, he is dead.” My father is dead, and I killed him. (1.5)

Geoffrey identifies with Ophelia (and Hamlet) because he himself has dealt with madness and the loss of his “father,” Oliver, for whose death he feels partly responsible. He thus connects textual analysis with emotional exploration, a technique that he uses repeatedly throughout the series with actors of various kinds, and which allies him with the forces of “authenticity.” To use Mazer’s words, he “paint[s] verbal pictures of their scenes’ given circumstances and the characters’ emotional situations that are so vivid and evocative that the actors can’t help but relive analogous moments from their own lives.” In directing Claire, however, his approach fails; although she appears to understand, her interpretation does not change because she is shallow and self-absorbed. Fortunately for Geoffrey and the integrity of his Hamlet, she breaks her legs and her understudy, sensitive ingénue Kate (Rachel McAdams) takes her
Kate’s Ophelia is tremulous, vulnerable, and emotionally real, and in the next episode she is shown playing the mad scenes as Geoffrey had directed.

The scene with Claire reveals the perceived inadequacy of acting “methods” like sense memory to playing Shakespeare. Geoffrey’s approach to Ophelia is presented as the “right” way of interpreting her character. He emphasizes her youth, weakness, and lack of agency, focusing primarily on Polonius’s death and Ophelia’s guilt, while glossing over, for example, the issue of sexual betrayal introduced in her “Saint Valentine’s Day” song.”33 Yet Ophelia is a character who has been the subject of intense debates by scholars, critics, actors, and directors. Elaine Showalter has shown how feminist critics, in particular, have tended to respond to her in three distinct ways: by defending her, by asserting “the impossibility of representing the feminine in patriarchal discourse,” and by reading her story as “the repressed story of Hamlet.”34 Showalter finds problems with all of these approaches, and concludes that the only story that can be told of this conflicted character is the cultural history of her representations. Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams extend Showalter’s work in their recent anthology The Afterlife of Ophelia, finding that “Ophelia is a screen on which a culture projects its preoccupations and reflects its values back onto itself … [S]he has become an endlessly adaptable symbol for the universality of the feminine.”35 From an acting perspective, Frances Barber describes her struggle to perform Ophelia at the Royal Shakespeare Company as “acutely intelligent and highly perceptive … She provides the feminine qualities lacking in [Hamlet’s] sensibilities … she’s strong, courageous, emotionally open … she’s the only person in the play who sees what’s going on.” She concurs with Geoffrey’s reading that Ophelia is “utterly guilt-ridden” about her father’s death, but her interpretation goes beyond his emphasis on weakness and powerlessness.36 Slings and Arrows tends to close down on debates and contradictions and focuses instead on coherent and realistic readings. Geoffrey’s approach to character is realistic in the sense that he demands actors provide a “plausible enactment of [the character’s] story as it might appear in an immediately recognizable present-day context.”37 Claire cannot do this, particularly since she does not trust or respect Shakespeare’s language (“Ophelia’s just singing nonsense songs”). She therefore takes refuge in an admittedly amateurish version of theatrical technique, rather than attempting to access an emotional reality.

Season Two provides a different example of a problem actor in Geoffrey’s production of Macbeth: unlike Claire, this actor is highly skilled, but represents an over-reliance on training rather than emotional connection to the text. Henry Breedlove (Geraint Wynn-Davies) is a well-known and respected actor and has played Macbeth successfully three times, as he constantly reminds everyone. The issue here is that he has a set, safe interpretation of the character that he plays over and over again. On the first day of rehearsals, he recites Macbeth’s dagger speech for the cast as a “talisman against the [Macbeth] curse” (2.2). His reading is polished and flawless, and the other actors are rapt and attentive. Geoffrey, however, sees through his technical proficiency. As another actor tells Henry later, “You’re a good actor, but in danger of becoming a hack: mired in technique and afraid to try anything
new” (2.5). Henry fundamentally disagrees with Geoffrey’s approach to Macbeth, which emphasizes the character’s vulnerability and ultimate humanity. In Act 1 Scene 5, for instance, Geoffrey wants to have Lady Macbeth strip Macbeth down and wash the blood from his naked body, to let the audience “see him as human … as a fallible human being; that he had a choice”(2.3). Henry refuses to perform the scene as directed, and Geoffrey fires him before the opening night, telling him, “I don’t like your complete lack of theatrical courage” (2.4). Geoffrey ultimately apologizes and Henry goes on for the opening, but he still obstinately sticks to his reading of the character. Geoffrey conspires with the stage manager and the rest of the cast to change certain pieces of blocking and scenery behind Henry’s back, thus completely destabilizing him and giving his performance the emotional immediacy (particularly the raw terror) it was lacking. The result is a production that is a smash hit for the Festival, due to its emotional (rather than technical) effects.

Geoffrey’s respect for Shakespearean authority is repeatedly shown to produce successful performances but also to convert insensitive audience members, allowing them access to redemption and transformation through the power of Shakespeare. When he takes over the production of Hamlet from Darren, Geoffrey decides to scrap the entire design and to perform the play on a bare stage and with the actors wearing rehearsal clothes that they select themselves. Richard is, of course, initially displeased by this decision from a commercial perspective, and tells Geoffrey, “People pay money to see these productions. They expect to see actors in costume. And a set. Especially in this case: it’s our flagship production” (1.5). Yet he abandons these trivial economic concerns after he sees the production, which he watches from the wings in the final episode of Season One. He is so completely caught up in the performance that he uncharacteristically ignores the buzzing of his cell phone (and Holly, calling him from her seat in the stalls). He is particularly engrossed by the “To be or not to be” soliloquy (appropriately, since he, like Hamlet, is having an ongoing crisis of identity and action) and is in tears by “Good night, sweet prince.” For a man who, three episodes earlier, declared his antipathy for Shakespeare, this is a conversion indeed. He congratulates Geoffrey backstage in a rush of emotion: “That was – I don’t know what to say. It was incredible … This is all new to me!” He is not alone: the audience laughs at Hamlet’s “That’s a fair thought to lie between maids’ legs,” and sobs during Ophelia’s lament for her dead father. (Even the previously oblivious Claire, watching from the audience, brushes away a tear, finally able to connect emotionally as a spectator.) The audience gasps as Hamlet falls after the duel and leap to their feet for the curtain call. At the final performance (staged at the beginning of Season Two), a gaggle of unruly high school students, who are only interested in throwing pennies at the actors during the first scene, are similarly converted by the end, watching intently and with sincere interest. Shakespeare and his plays are thus portrayed as powerful, life-changing agents, with the ability to alter the viewpoints of even the most skeptical spectators. Jack, the production’s Hollywood star, tells Geoffrey, “This has been the most incredible experience of my life” (2.1). He, too, has been converted by the power of the theatre and Shakespeare, but as he owes the studio three films he has to leave New Burbage.
Geoffrey’s Macbeth is similarly revelatory, for audiences and actors alike, and presents certain challenges to the money-focused “accessible” theatre favored by Oliver and Richard. Geoffrey decides he wants to build a thrust for the production: “I want to extend the stage into the audience. I want to get in their faces.” Richard is wary; despite his conversion at Geoffrey’s Hamlet, he still has to deal with the theatre’s dismal financial state:

RICHARD: How much does a thrust cost?
GEOFFREY: I don’t know, a hundred – two hundred thousand?
RICHARD: WHAT?
GEOFFREY: And you’ll probably have to lose some seats, somewhere around fifty.
RICHARD: Are you insane? No, no, I say no to the thrust, no!
GEOFFREY: … You said you would support me, remember? (2.2)

This conversation exemplifies the struggle between art and commerce; yet Geoffrey’s Macbeth goes on, surprisingly, to unite these two seemingly opposing forces into a satisfying whole. Against all odds, the “rebranding” campaign causes a “youthquake,” drawing young people to New Burbage in unprecedented numbers. (“Young people want to see the show!” Richard tells Geoffrey and Anna excitedly. “[They’re] gathering in the parking lot!” [2.6]) As with the production of Hamlet, we see highlights from the play intercut with shots of the audience weeping, gasping, and applauding tumultuously at the end. Again, the production inspires instances of conversion. Margaret (Joanne Boland), a teenage intern at the theatre who initially slacks her duties and smokes pot with her boyfriend, is so into the show that she sees it multiple times with her friends, debating whether the moment of nudity in Act 1 Scene 5 is “gratuitous” or not (2.6). When understudy Jerry (Oliver Dennis) goes on as Macbeth as an initial replacement for the fired Henry, his estranged wife is in the audience. She is so captivated and moved by his performance that it ultimately saves their marriage. “You were amazing!” she sobs in his dressing room after the performance. “I was so proud. I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” (2.5). In Season Three, we hear that she is pregnant again and eventually has a son, effectively inverting and negating the Macbeths’ marital narrative.

Geoffrey’s Macbeth bolsters Shakespearean authority, counteracting claims that the theatre and Shakespeare are irrelevant or cannot be commercially successful. The first episode of Season Three reveals that the production has had an extremely successful run on Broadway. The production is proof that Shakespeare done “right” (with emotional honesty, integrity, and with “theatricality” rather than theatrical effects) can bridge the gap between art and commercialism. Yet Season Three goes on to illustrate the triumph of commerce over art, effectively ousting Shakespeare from the New Burbage Festival. This is accomplished through a paralleling of two storylines: one involving Geoffrey’s production of King Lear, and one involving Darren Nichols’s production of East Hastings, a new musical, in which Richard also takes an interest. Initially King Lear is the major production of the season and is slated to be performed in the Festival’s large theatre, while East Hastings is in the small studio theatre.42
Geoffrey’s choice of leading actor is characteristically motivated by artistic, rather than commercial concerns: disregarding well-known choices like William Shatner and Kenneth Welsh (who appears in high dudgeon at having been rejected in episode 3.1), he chooses Charles Kingman (William Hutt) for Lear because of the actor’s understanding of and emotional commitment to the role. This choice ultimately spells doom for the production, as Charles reveals that he has cancer and only has a few months to live. He asks Geoffrey to let him play Lear before he dies, and Geoffrey (again, choosing personal and artistic issues over practical and commercial ones) agrees. The result is that Charles is unable to perform on the production’s opening night, and Richard, furious, reschedules the production in the studio theatre, and then, when Charles misses a second opening, cancels the production altogether. Geoffrey is forced to resign, and Richard assumes control of the Festival, with Darren as titular artistic director.

Yet the final episode of the series nonetheless contains a performance of Geoffrey and Charles’s King Lear: a performance that follows the pattern already established by the productions of Hamlet and Macbeth and serves as a summation of the series’ core values, Shakespearean authority and emotional realism. Geoffrey organizes a single performance of the production in a church space, using costumes stolen from the Festival and with the original cast, all of whom break their Festival contracts by doing the performance. In this “empty space,” there are none of the trappings of the commercial theatre. At the Festival, Richard encouraged Geoffrey to use the Sierra System, a high-tech contraption to create realistic winds and sound for the storm scene; in the church space, the effects are created using a thundersheet and musical instruments. The audience sits on folding chairs, and there is no proscenium arch or even a curtain. Further, the emotional realism of the play is heightened by Charles’s intimate connection with Lear. The performance is astonishing, and as in previous seasons, there are numerous shots of the audience’s spellbound, moved faces. Lear’s death is fully staged, from the moment he enters howling with Cordelia’s body, and the episode overall contains more footage of the production than in previous seasons. This scene epitomizes the stripped-down nature of the entire production: it is devoid of music, uses handheld camera work to emphasize Lear’s physical fragility as he staggers in with Cordelia and focuses on Charles’s almost unbearably emotional performance. Geoffrey’s production of Lear is not successful in the commercial sense; rather, it redefines success to focus exclusively on honoring author and text, and on creating an emotionally authentic experience for audience and actors alike. The closing episode suggests that the lack of production values in the church space allows the authentic Lear to emerge through performance.

In addition to privileging Shakespeare and King Lear, this final production also honors the veteran actor who chooses to spend his life in the theatre, rather than bowing to commercial pressures by taking film and television work. The casting of William Hutt as Charles in Season Three underscores the series’ presentation of this ideal. Hutt “was perhaps Canada’s most eminent Shakespearean actor” and played Lear multiple times at the Stratford Festival. The connections between actor and character went even further: at the time he played...
Charles, Hutt was also nearing the end of his life and died from cancer in 2007. The television audience thus witnesses a threefold connection between art and life, watching Lear, Charles, and Hutt transcendentally expire. By casting Hutt, the series honors his integrity as an actor associated primarily with Shakespeare, contrasting him with characters who are seduced by the commercial possibilities outside the theatre world. Jack, for instance, chooses to go back to Hollywood despite his revelatory experience playing Hamlet, while Barbara (Janet Bailey), the actress playing Goneril in Lear, has made a lot of money playing a “lizard queen” on a television series. She encourages Ellen Fanshaw (Martha Burns), the actress playing Regan, to leave the Festival and take a leading role in a television series; yet Ellen discovers that the work is unsatisfying. By closing the series with Hutt’s performance as Charles/Lear, and returning both Barbara and Ellen to the theatre for the final performance, Sling and Arrows asserts the value of art, even though the narrative trajectory presents the victory of commercialism. In the last scenes, Richard sits alone in his office despite his success with East Hastings, while Geoffrey, Ellen, and the Lear cast celebrate their artistic triumph together in the actors’ bar.

As these closing images suggest, Slings and Arrows shows that Shakespeare’s emotional appeal is so powerful that it can bring people together, bridging cultural and ideological divides, and overcoming romantic difficulties. Over and over again the series reveals that seemingly ordinary lives can be transformed by Shakespeare’s plays. In Season One, for instance, Geoffrey directs a corporate workshop for employees of Allied Acrylic. All of the participants are in marketing, except for Terry (Bob Martin), who is an accountant. Geoffrey is supposed to be teaching them how to use Shakespeare to be more successful at their jobs and is understandably skeptical of such a goal:

GEOFFREY: Do any of you seriously believe you’re going to sell more plastics to the construction industry by studying, oh say, the crisis management techniques of Claudius [in Hamlet], bearing in mind he was a scheming villain who murdered his brother and married his sister-in-law in order to gain control over a kingdom?
TERRY: No.
GEOFFREY: Neither do I. So let’s get rid of the curriculum and just fuck around with some text. (1.3)

He goes on to direct Terry as Macbeth, using the “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow” speech. As usual, he is insightful, telling Terry, “You have lost your identity ... you have become a stranger even to yourself.” Terry performs the speech and becomes emotionally involved in it; in close-up, we see that he is really feeling the words. The camera cuts to Geoffrey watching, smiling, proud and moved. Terry is congratulated by his peers after he finishes, particularly a red-haired woman who had earlier derided him as “the numbers man.” “I love this,” says Terry delightedly. He and Geoffrey have a drink at the actors’ bar afterwards, and Geoffrey gets him a non-speaking role in Hamlet. This scene suggests that
Shakespeare can bring out the poetry latent in everyone’s soul—even an accountant’s.

Season Two also has a numbers-focused character unexpectedly bonding with an actor through the medium of Shakespeare. Ellen, a stereotypically disorganized actress, is being audited and has regular meetings with a government employee (Elizabeth Saunders) to try and straighten out her tax statements. Eventually the auditor tells her that she owes over $27,000 in back taxes. Ellen, distraught, bursts into tears and castigates the auditor for being unfeeling and failing to relate to her as a person. The auditor then admits that she has seen Ellen onstage many times, and that her favorite was Ellen’s performance as Paulina in The Winter’s Tale. She quotes a portion of Paulina’s speech to Leontes beginning, “What studied torments, tyrant, hast for me?” Ellen, shocked, repeats the lines along with her, and the auditor exclaims delightedly, “Oh, it makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up just thinking about it!” (2.5). By sharing their mutual love for Shakespeare, Ellen realizes the auditor’s essential humanity, and for the first time asks her name.

Ellen’s on-again, off-again love affair with Geoffrey is another relationship that is salvaged through Shakespeare and is just one of the many romantic relationships that Shakespeare “saves” in this series. The two are originally brought together through playing Hamlet and Ophelia, although life rather imitates art in that sexual betrayal and madness drive them apart. (Ellen sleeps with Oliver; Geoffrey goes crazy.) They come together again at the end of Season One after the success of Hamlet but have relationship difficulties (not unlike the Macbeths) in Season Two, only to get back together at the end of the season under the influence of Romeo and Juliet. This scene is not quite as romantic as it sounds: they are watching the production from the wings, and Ellen comments bitterly, “I hate this play … When you watch it you feel miserable because you don’t have that passion in your life. Nobody does; it’s a fantasy. It’s irresponsible.” Geoffrey revises her interpretation slightly: “I think it’s painfully accurate: two idiots meet, they fall in love, they’re happy briefly, and then all hell breaks loose. Happens all the time.” They look at each other, and agree that they are “both big fat losers” (2.6). Joining hands, they watch the show; Shakespeare has united them once again through his “painfully accurate” rendering of the human condition.

Each season also presents a pair of ingénues whose relationships are facilitated by Shakespeare, albeit on different levels. Jack and Kate come together in Season One as a romantic and comedic re-writing of Hamlet and Ophelia. Even before she wins the role of Ophelia, Kate is attracted to and starts sleeping with Jack/Hamlet. Her roommate, Claire, warns her about “making a fool out of [herself]” by sleeping with the leading actor and Hollywood star, recalling Polonius’s admonition to Ophelia that “Hamlet is a prince out of thy star.” By the beginning of Season Two (as they near the end of the run), Jack asks Kate to come with him when he returns to California, even though she has been cast as Juliet in the Festival’s next season. Kate struggles with the decision, and their offstage strife fuels their onstage performances; Geoffrey tells Jack that he was “on fire” in the nunnery scene, and Jack acknowledges that their fight is making the play more emotionally “real” (2.1). Jack and Kate
work out their relationship through Hamlet and Ophelia - and Kate eventually makes her
decision by playing Juliet to Ellen’s Nurse (albeit offstage). During the Hamlet cast party in
the actors’ bar, Ellen tells Kate that she can “play Juliet or [she] can live it,” and advises her
that she needs to pursue her happiness using the words of the Nurse: “Go, girl; seek happy
nights to happy days.” Again, Shakespeare’s words and characters help to resolve conflict
and facilitate love and happiness. Kate’s performance as Ophelia is the fulfillment of a
childhood dream (“I have wanted to be Ophelia since … I was twelve” [1.5]) but also provides
the means of finding “true love.”

Similarly, in Season Two, Sarah and Patrick’s romance is an upbeat adaptation of Romeo and
Juliet’s tragedy, but with a twist: Patrick is gay when Sarah meets him. Like Kate, Sarah is an
ingénue who believes in the passion and power of Shakespeare, and it ends up transfiguring
everything around her. In an inversion of Romeo’s pursuit of Juliet in Shakespeare’s text,
Sarah dictates the terms on which their relationship develops. (This is ironic given her
resistance to Darren’s gender-inverted rehearsal exercise.) She asks Geoffrey to coach them
privately, and Geoffrey has them run around the theatre, do push-ups and then jump directly
into the text of the balcony scene. “No thinking - just instinct!” he tells them. The result is a
scene full of excitement and heavy breathing, in which they are all stunned by the power of
the text. “Wow, it’s really passionate. And poetic - and sexual, too,” Sarah enthuses (2.4).
Patrick and Geoffrey are also caught by the magic, inspiring Geoffrey’s own direction of
Macbeth in the following scene, and Patrick’s eventual “conversion” to heterosexuality. In his
next rehearsal with Sarah, they read Act 3 Scene 5 in her bedroom, with candles and wine,
and end up falling into bed together while reciting Shakespeare’s poetry. The staging of this
scene echoes John Madden’s film Shakespeare in Love (1998), in which Shakespeare (Joseph
Fiennes) beds Viola (Gwyneth Paltrow) while they recite the same dialogue. Both scenes
heterosexualize Shakespeare, removing any suggestions of queer sexuality latent in early
modern performance practices and in Shakespeare’s texts. As he has sex with Sarah while
quoting Romeo and Juliet, Patrick exclaims, “Oh god, this is hot!” (2.4). Slings and Arrows
endows Shakespeare’s language with the power literally to straighten him out, enabling his
relationship with Sarah and letting him find the “real emotion” latent in the scene (and,
presumably, his “real” orientation).

Season Three contains the final romantic relationship that is enabled by Shakespeare, between
Paul (Aaron Abrams), the actor playing Edgar in Geoffrey’s Lear, and Sophie (Sarah Polley),
the actress cast as Cordelia. The paralleling of the Lear production with Darren’s musical East
Hastings sets up a parallel between Sophie as the “real Cordelia” and musical star Megan
(Melanie Merkosky) as the “false Cordelia,” between whom Paul must eventually choose. On
the first day of rehearsals for both productions, Charles narrates the story of Lear for the cast,
terspersed with Nigel (the author of East Hastings) telling the musical’s story to his cast.
The latter is “the story of a junkie hooker named Lulu and her fight to kick the horse.” The
parallels between Cordelia and Lulu become clear as the camera cross-cuts between the two
rehearsals; both are, in the words of Lulu’s big solo number, “trying to be heard” (3.2). Paul
initially falls for Megan as she sings this song, watching her from the wings with rapt attention. Although Sophie correctly diagnoses that he is “blinded by lust” to the fact that Megan is unintelligent and shallow (3.3), he nonetheless persists in his relationship with her until he is “saved” from his mistake by the power of Shakespeare. During the performance of Lear, he watches Sophie/Cordelia from the wings as she performs the reconciliation with Lear in Act 4 Scene 7. He and Sophie are both emotionally moved by the scene, in ways that are shown as more authentic than his experience of watching Megan sing “Trying to Be Heard.” Paul realizes his mistake, takes Sophie aside after the performance and kisses her passionately.

All of the couples in the series—Geoffrey and Ellen as well as the ingénues—come together despite considerable odds, but Slings and Arrows suggests that Shakespeare and his texts are powerful enough to bridge any divide.

The series underscores the power of Shakespeare on yet another level: by offering multiple “real-life” connections between its characters and the actors who play them. Along with William Hutt, many of the cast members—such as Paul Gross, Martha Burns, Susan Coyne, and Stephen Ouimette—are Stratford veterans. Some, like Hutt, had even played roles analogous to their character’s; Gross, for instance, had played Hamlet at Stratford in 2000, albeit without suffering a breakdown like Geoffrey. Gross and Burns met while performing in a play, and are also married with two children, again apparently having evaded the drama that plagues their characters in Slings and Arrows. The final scene of the series, in which the Lear cast celebrates Geoffrey and Ellen’s marriage along with their successful performance, thus attains an extra dimension of “realness.” The connections between actor/character/Shakespearean role(s) highlight the relevance of Shakespeare to “real life,” ultimately asserting that viewers’ lives, like those of the characters they watch, can be transformed by exposure to Shakespeare and his plays. It is important to remember, however, that Slings and Arrows presents us with what Worthen terms “dominant Shakespeare”: that is, “Shakespeare not marked as contestatory, or resistant, or experimental, or political, Shakespeare played (with all this implies) ‘straight’.” This is Shakespeare as the ultimate authoritative presence. Hamlet and its author might be dead, as Darren Nichols tells his cast, but Slings and Arrows, like many other iterations of Shakespeare within popular culture, nonetheless sets them up as objects for worship.

---


2 All quotations from the series are cited with the season and episode numbers in parentheses. The CASP site includes a clip from this scene here: http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca/multimedia/video/slings_1.mov.

3 Kim Solga’s essay on the work of director Peter Hinton at the Stratford Festival of Canada suggests a similar conclusion. In her analysis of Hinton’s 2006 Duchess of Malfi and 2008 Taming of the Shrew she asks, “Could it be that his work’s density and, ultimately, its political potential are enabled by his negotiation with Stratford’s culture—

4 Executive producer Niv Fichman makes this claim in the production notes on the Season Two DVD. Nonetheless, as co-writer Bob Martin points out, “Stratford was at first angry about the series … Richard Monette … thought [Oliver] was based on him … Stratford completely embraced the series eventually.” “Downstage Center with Bob Martin,” *American Theatre Wing*, June 2, 2006, <http://americantheatrewing.org/downstagecenter/detail/bob_martin>.

5 Peter Parolin, “‘What Revels Are In Hand’? A Change of Direction at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival of Canada,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 60 (Summer 2009): 197.

6 Ibid., 201.


8 The current work in textual studies emphasizes the instability of Shakespearean texts, the prominent role of collaboration, and the resulting difficulty in claiming any version of Shakespeare as authoritative. John Jowett describes Shakespearean textual studies as a “world in which the categories by which we describe things are blurred, traditional interpretations are open to challenge, and the condition of the text itself is unstable. To that extent it presents not so much a body of settled knowledge as an outline of ways of thinking about text.” John Jowett, *Shakespeare and Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5. Lukas Erne argues that “a well-informed view of Shakespeare needs to start with the acknowledgement that what we think of as Shakespeare’s plays have been shaped by at least four different forms of collaboration”: with other dramatists, with his fellow actors, with his printers, and with modern editors. Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare’s Modern Collaborators* (London: Continuum, 2008), 1-5.


12 Solga, “Realism and the Ethics of Risk at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival,” 418. As she points out, this kind of realism “often on stage looks elegant, tidy, and controlled despite the messy labor of actors behind the façade.”


16 The magazine cover shows a beaming Richard and a glowering Geoffrey, under the headline “New Burbage’s Terrible Twins.” Richard shows Geoffrey excitedly in Episode 3.1, crowing, “I used to dream about this!” Geoffrey responds disgustedly, “Put it away.” The moment serves to further emphasize the growing disparity in their views: while Richard courts economic success, Geoffrey eschews it.

17 The CASP site provides a clip from this scene here: http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca/multimedia/video/slings_9.mov.


19 Laurie E. Osborne, “‘A Local Habitation and a Name: Television and Shakespeare,” *Shakespeare Survey* 61 (2008): 222. Osborne also cites the Festival’s casting of American movie star Jack Crew as Hamlet as another potential threat to Shakespeare and “to Canadian culture.”

20 The CASP site provides a clip from this scene here: http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca/multimedia/video/slings_8.mov.

21 Ibid., 223.

22 Pittman, *Authorizing Shakespeare on Film and Television: Gender, Class, and Ethnicity in Adaptation*, 179.
Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 5.3.23-29. Anna’s appraisal of Richard also recalls Geoffrey’s interpretation of Macbeth in Season Two: “I think it’s essential that the audience see Macbeth as a fallible human being, that he had a choice” (2.3).


Solga, “Realism and the Ethics of Risk at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival,” 425.

Mazer, “Sense/Memory/Sense-Memory: Reading Narratives of Shakespearean Rehearsals,” 338.

The CASP site provides a clip from this scene here: [http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca/multimedia/video/slings_2.mov](http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca/multimedia/video/slings_2.mov).


Pittman’s chapter on the series focuses on the father-son conflict between Geoffrey and Oliver, arguing that the series “imagines the act of staging and interpreting Shakespeare as a competition over authority – a competition both inter- and intra-generational and distinctly male” (178-179).

Mazer, “Sense/Memory/Sense-Memory: Reading Narratives of Shakespearean Rehearsals,” 329.

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 4.5.47-53, 57-64.


The CASP site provides a clip from this scene focusing on the fight between Macbeth and Young Siward here: [http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca/multimedia/video/slings_4.mov](http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca/multimedia/video/slings_4.mov).


Ibid., 3.2.107.

Kevin Ewert’s essay on the remodeling of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon debunks the idea that a thrust stage (and theatre architecture more generally) will provide greater emotional immediacy and more “authentic” Shakespearean productions. His piece takes issue with the rhetoric used by the RSC to associate their new theatre with Shakespearean authority, although in the process he tends (like *Slings and Arrows*) to privilege emotional realism over “a strong directorial image” and point of view. Kevin Ewert, “The Thrust Stage is Not Some Direct Link to Shakespeare,” *Shakespeare Bulletin* 29 (Summer 2011): 169.

The parallels to the Stratford Festival are interesting to note here. Parolin describes Stratford’s small Studio Theatre as “a venue where art trumped commerce,” and where experimental productions could be staged. Monette himself described the Studio as a place “to produce work that is important but not popular” (209). Shakespeare was not performed in the Studio Theatre during Monette’s tenure. *Slings and Arrows* dramatizes the reversal that takes place between the productions of *Lear* and *East Hastings*. The latter, as a new Canadian play, premieres in the studio space, but goes on to a sell-out run on the mainstage. The fact that it is a musical accounts for its success, while Geoffrey’s stripped-down, emotionally intense *Lear* is ultimately more suited to the smaller space. Monette was criticized for not staging Shakespeare (a la Geoffrey) in the Studio, and the experimental productions staged in the small venue “foreground[ed] the question of why Shakespeare at Stratford … [was not] more consistently


44 As Osborne reminds us, the deaths here are actually fourfold: the series develops “parallels among Kingman, Lear, and the theater … until Kingman himself makes the connection explicit in episode 3: ‘And like the theatre, I’m boldly fighting a slow, undignified death.’” Osborne, “Serial Shakespeare: Intermedial Performance and the Outrageous Fortunes of Slings and Arrows.”

45 In an interesting amalgamation of multiple Shakespearean references, Ellen/Regan is lured away from loyalty to her theatrical family (and particularly Geoffrey/Lear) by a character that parallels Shakespeare’s Edmund: Chris, a young, hot American agent who tells Ellen that he “find[s] older women attractive” and reveals that he had played Mark Antony in Julius Caesar at NYU (3.4). Later, in a brief scene from the science fiction show to which he has signed Ellen, we see that Ellen’s character is performing an adaptation of Mark Antony’s funeral oration for Caesar. The suggestion is that Chris’s show adapts Shakespeare to attain credibility, a tongue-in-cheek gesture given Slings and Arrows’ large-scale adaptations of Hamlet, Macbeth, and King Lear.

46 Shakespeare, Macbeth, 5.5.18-27.

47 Shakespeare, The Winter’s Tale, 3.2.173.

48 Shakespeare, Hamlet, 2.2.141.

49 Episode 2.1 of the series; Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, 1.3.107.


51 Worthen, Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance, 42. His invocation of “straight” Shakespeare recalls the heterosexualizing of Patrick/Romeo in Season Two of Slings and Arrows.