

Ailis Duff, Rebecca MacMillan, and Marina Cano

Improv, Shakespeare, and Drag: A Conversation with Impromptu Shakespeare

This interview took place during the Edinburgh Fringe Festival (August 2017), where Impromptu Shakespeare has been performing since 2013. An improvised theatre group, Impromptu Shakespeare weaves in one new 'Shakespeare' play at every show. The conversation was led by Marina Cano, as part of her research on improvised Shakespeare and improvised Jane Austen. It involved Impromptu actors Ailis Duff and Rebecca MacMillan, and touched upon matters of improvisation, methodology, adaptation, Shakespeare on stage, and gender-blind performance. Marina Cano is a Research Associate at the University of Limerick, Ireland. She is the author of *Jane Austen and Performance* (Palgrave 2017) and the co-editor of *Jane Austen and William Shakespeare: A Love Affair in Literature, Film, and Performance* (Palgrave 2019).

Key terms: improvised performance, Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Jane Austen, Sherlock Holmes, cross-dressing.

EARLY IN August 2017, I was waiting outside Teviot Row House in Edinburgh, a late nineteenth-century stone building that doubles as the student union during term time and a theatre venue during the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. This imposing Gothic-style construction was to be the site of my interview with Impromptu Shakespeare actors Ailis Duff and Rebecca MacMillan. A British improvisational company, Impromptu Shakespeare has been weaving in a fully new 'Shakespeare' play at every show since 2013. When the audience walk into the venue, they receive a few ping-pong balls with typically Shakespearean ingredients – for example, Scotland, a king, a crown, a skull, and a bishop. At the start of the show, the audience are asked to throw the balls onto the stage, while the cast performs a Renaissance dance. The balls that get caught in the Bard's breeches, worn by a cast member, become the basis for that day's show.

On the day of our interview, I had been to see the show, which ended up being the story of two physically disabled princesses struggling to get husbands. The slow-walking princesses were played by my interviewees:

Rebecca MacMillan, one of the founding members of Impromptu Shakespeare, and Ailis Duff, who joined the company in 2016. The purpose of my interview was to delve deeper into their practice of improv and their uses of Shakespeare. It was conducted under the auspices of my work on Shakespeare improv and Austen improv, itself part of a larger project on the interconnected fortunes of Jane Austen and William Shakespeare as pillars of British literature. The result was the anthology *Jane Austen and William Shakespeare: A Love Affair in Literature, Film, and Performance* (2019). Although my chapter in this collection quotes from the interview below, the material seemed rich and interesting enough to warrant full reproduction.¹ Indeed, it might be of interest to scholars of improvisation, Shakespeare, and gender studies – or simply to theatre enthusiasts.

Now, as Impromptu actors and I step inside Teviot House, we are greeted by the bustling energy that characterizes the Edinburgh Fringe arts festival – the crowd, the noise, the music, the laughter, and the constant comings and goings of people in outfits

of every description. Up the main stairwell, we settle on the leather couch and armchairs of a relatively quiet café. Curtain up, it is time to begin the interview.²

Marina Cano *My first and obvious question is why Shakespeare? From all writers in the world, why Shakespeare?*

Rebecca MacMillan Basically, how Impromptu Shakespeare came together (which would also explain why we chose Shakespeare) was that there was a man, Rob Wilson, who got really into improv and went out to Chicago, where they have the Improvised Shakespeare Company at the iO Theater. He saw this and got so inspired that he wanted to set up something similar in the UK. The year before, I had been to Chicago too with some of the Maydays [a British improv company]. We had been training with iO Chicago and, as we watched the Improvised Shakespeare Company, I thought: 'I'd love to do that sometime.' So we all brought the idea home, and Rob set up Impromptu Shakespeare, including in the cast some of the Maydays. At the time there was some Shakespeare improv here, but it was mostly by the School of Night, who have a different take from us.

Ailis Duff It's short form, isn't it?

Rebecca Yes, at that time, definitely.

The School of Night, was it a company?

Rebecca It was a company, yes. They still exist, although two of them are now called the Rhapsodes and they've got their own show. Now they do a full play, more like what we do. But in those days, they had a show made up of shorter pieces, like a Shakespeare sonnet. We wanted to do an hour-long show that felt like a Shakespeare play, but was improvised. So Rob set up Impromptu Shakespeare, which ran in 2013 in the Underbelly [an Edinburgh Fringe venue]. The next year, he moved on to other things and handed the company over to the cast. We have continued this trajectory, trying to honour both Shakespeare and good improv. I think that's the challenge, isn't it? And also what's most

enjoyable about it: it's almost trying to do the impossible, like trying to fly. There's no way you can fly; there's no way you can actually create a new Shakespeare play.

We try to get it to feel as much like Shakespeare as we can, but at the same time there is this joyful excitement at doing something that we know is impossible. Sometimes it's amazing, and sometimes it doesn't come out quite how we intended. But then, as improvisers, we believe that in improv there are really no mistakes. So when something goes wrong, we find the comedy in that or we find something new. I'd say that's my take on 'Why Shakespeare?' [To Ailis] But I'd like to hear what attracted you to the company when you auditioned, and why you wanted to join an improvised Shakespeare group.

Ailis Certainly what attracted me to it was that I loved Shakespeare. I had also done long-form improv before in a different genre, the musical theatre. My other current show at the Fringe, *Notflix*, is a musical. So when I saw you were doing improv Shakespeare, I thought: not only would that be fun, but it would also work in a very satisfying way. For me, the things that are the most satisfying about improv are things that we have, to some extent, taken from Shakespeare in the first place: the depth of emotion, the character dynamics, the way the plot lines come together at the end. Then, once I started, I discovered things I hadn't thought about, like the actor–audience relationship. Shakespeare's plays are written for the actor–audience relationship, where the actor is very aware of there being an audience; you have soliloquies and asides in a way that you don't in modern plays. And actually, improv is naturally like that as well.

Rebecca It's self-aware. You have a fourth wall, but it's very thin.

Ailis You can cross it without coming out of character or being untrue to the scene. It's totally fine to go, 'By the way, we're aware of you on stage and we're going to include you in this.' That's not a betrayal of the reality of the scene. And, actually, Shakespeare and

improv are a kind of weirdly perfect combination. If you try to do that in other forms of improv, it can feel a little bit jarring. In musical theatre, for example, actors don't tend to do that as much, and you have to be careful if you want to stay true to the genre. No character would just turn and wink at the audience in musical theatre but, in Shakespeare, they totally would. I quite like that about improvising Shakespeare. It's this sort of dialogue between audience and performers that is so naturally there in Shakespeare. Even when you see Shakespeare at the Globe, where they try to keep it as stylistically similar as possible, the way a soliloquy is played feels as if it were improvised.

Rebecca People are so precious about Shakespeare these days, and you get companies which do Folio versions of things because that seems to be exactly the way he wrote it. But then you realize that, in the plays, there is room for improvisation. That's why improvising Shakespeare works, because in the original performances some parts were improvised. Obviously we are not using real Shakespeare, but we try to play with tropes and ideas. I trained mostly in American-style improvisation, so to me improv has always felt like something coming from outside, something foreign. And it's also really nice to take something that's so much part of our culture and be able to improvise it.

Improvisation

I think you have already answered my second question, which was 'Why improv?', so why Shakespeare and why improv? And why the two of them together, rather than do a traditional performance of The Taming of the Shrew, for instance?

Rebecca I find improv endlessly exciting. It accesses parts of me that scripted performance doesn't. If I act something scripted, I don't ever feel in the state I can get into with improvisation, where you're just completely in the moment. Sometimes you get so much into a character and it's almost as if they took over and you were just channelling them. It's similar to what happens to jazz musicians when

they play and feel that they are just channelling the music. The other thing is that actors with a scripted piece obviously need to have a good relationship with each other. But as improvisers – say Ailis and me – on stage we've got nothing but each other.

Ailis Yes, there needs to be a good amount of trust for it to work.

Rebecca There's that sort of connection between us, and also the fun, the play: effectively, improvising is like playing, although in a very particular level of the cerebral, the physical, and the emotional. For us, improvising is enjoyable in the same way that for children it's enjoyable to play.

Ailis There's something you were saying that reminds me of an exercise we did in drama school. It was supposed to take Shakespeare back to how it would have been done at the time: a cue-script performance, where the actors would just have had their own lines and the cue lines. And actually it felt a lot like improv because you don't know what the other person is going to say. You just know what you are meant to say when they say a particular cue. It feels really similar to improv, and I think maybe that's another reason why improv and Shakespeare go well together. In a way, a scripted performance these days often loses that sense of having to hang on to people's every word. But in improv or in a cue-script performance, you have to concentrate, be in the moment, because you don't know what they are going to say next.

Rebecca Yeah, you have to listen and you have to react.

Ailis And particularly, as we were saying, with a lot of companies being quite precious about Shakespeare these days, and people knowing some of the plays inside out, it's very difficult to go in as an actor or an audience and pretend you don't know what's going to happen. I did a Shakespeare play the week before we came up to Edinburgh, and having done so much improv on it really helped. I think improvising Shakespeare has really helped my straight acting.



Impromptu Shakespeare.
James Irving and Jen
Rowe. Photo: Robert
Stafford, 2017.

When we did the exercise in drama school, there was this really interesting scene from *Measure for Measure* with two people in my year. It's the scene where Isabella has to tell her brother Claudio that he's going to be executed, and the student playing Claudio had never read Shakespeare before. He had no clue about what was going to happen. He only had a little synopsis about his character – as much as you would have known if you had been cast as Claudio in the first production of the play: these are my lines; I know she is my sister; I can guess from my lines that she has bad news for me. But he genuinely didn't know what was coming, and you wouldn't; it's not in Claudio's lines. His reaction was just incredible; it was one of the most amazing performances I've ever seen, because he genuinely didn't have the bit where she basically says 'Angelo says he'll release you if I have sex with him.' And he went, like, 'He said *what?*' Because he had no

idea. That's something that happens all the time in improv because we genuinely don't know what's going to be said.

Rebecca It happened the other day to your character . . .

Ailis Jen [Rowe] just killed me off!

Rebecca Ailis was a noblewoman, the princess of somewhere, and the king had locked her up in her chamber. She decided that she was going to sneak out to experience the world, since she didn't like the way she was living. But because she said she was going to take herself down her balcony, Jen understood that she was going to throw herself off the balcony.

Ailis And I just wanted to climb down! Jen walks in and says 'The Duchess is dead. She just jumped off the balcony, killed herself.'

Rebecca And I thought, *what?* She's done what? But it was really funny; we all really enjoyed that moment, and I think the audience realized that it was unexpected. Sometimes it's funny because, as I was saying, when something unexpected happens, that's the point when you're really in the moment. You might feel it's terrible, but great things can come out of that – unexpectedly.

Talking about improv and your experience of improv, have you improvised any other authors? Rebecca, I think you improvise Sherlock Holmes as well, am I right? If so, how does it compare and contrast with improvising Shakespeare? Say, improvising Conan Doyle versus improvising Shakespeare?

Rebecca I think the big difference is that the genre is Sherlock Homes, not Conan Doyle the writer. We don't particularly spend time looking at the way he wrote, or the specific words he used. But, in Impromptu Shakespeare, we do: our rehearsals might include practising the iambic pentameter or

doing Shakespeare insults. We periodically go back to actual Shakespeare to try to draw out more from him.

The flavour.

Rebecca Exactly. In contrast, improvising Sherlock Holmes includes not only the writer, Conan Doyle, but also the various TV productions and the films. So it's the genre of Sherlock Holmes rather than the genre of Conan Doyle, if that makes sense. But in Impromptu Shakespeare, we go back to him, rather than, say, Leonardo DiCaprio's Romeo. We never reference that.

How to Improvise Shakespeare

Thinking about your method in Impromptu Shakespeare, and the ping-pong balls you use to get things started, what other tropes do you have apart from the ones that got selected today: illness, a love poem, a tavern, mockery, and a kiss? Who came up with them? And what kind of criteria did they follow to select them?



Impromptu Shakespeare. Opening game of ping-pong balls. Left to right: Rebecca MacMillan, Tom Wilkinson, and Jen Rowe. Photo: Robert Stafford, 2017.

Ailis Actually, we are going to be trying to write some new ones this evening, so if you've got any suggestions . . .

Rebecca There's always a portion of balls that get stuck, or damaged, or disappear somewhere behind the stage.

Ailis Definitely lost. I reckon a good ten per cent disappeared last week. So we need to do a bit of a brainstorming tonight.

Rebecca When we started out in 2013, we tried to get locations such as Rome or Scotland. We also had settings, like a forest, and 'things that might occur', like poison in the ear or unrequited love. Some balls were made over to objects: an arrow, a dagger, or a crown. These were objects we felt were instantly recognizably Shakespearean. We also had emotional states, or states of being (youth, revenge) – motivations I suppose. And then we had some characters – say, bishops or kings.

Ailis When we restocked the balls last year, we split them into three categories. One of them was 'plot points', such as poison in the ear, a betrayal, a love song. Then there were themes and places or objects. One of the things we discussed was how many of each we should have. We had had a few tricky shows: in one of them, all five balls were plot points, which got really hard, because someone had to be poisoned, someone had to be betrayed, someone had to sing a love song, and so on. How could we get all these in?

Then we had another one that was a bit dead because we got five vague themes – like youth, autumn – and we ended up feeling that that hadn't given us enough. That's why this year we've refined our method with the questions we ask the audience. So, if we end up with a selection that doesn't have any plot points, we can get something out of it.

Rebecca We try to balance it out. We ask questions that flesh out what we've got. So if we haven't got a location, we'd ask for it. Today we got Hartlepool. But then I suppose when you ask questions from the audience,

you also want to make it a bit personal. So it feels a bit more real and they are more invested.

I suppose what I'm interested in is what's considered traditionally or typically Shakespearean? Hence my question about how you select these tropes. In the end people – not just you – tend to associate certain tropes particularly with Shakespeare.

Rebecca We definitely try to make sure that they are *all* mentioned in Shakespeare, even if it's just in passing. For example, we've got a newt in there, but the only newt I can think of is the witches' in *Macbeth*. We also retire balls. We regularly look at what we are doing and ask ourselves, 'What doesn't feel like it would belong in Shakespeare?'

Ailis After the last Fringe, we realized some tropes that had come up a few times weren't very Shakespearean. One that we kept falling into was the working-class hero – one of the balls was a shepherd – and you think: the working-class hero is not in Shakespeare.

So have you taken that one out now?

Ailis Yes, it happened by mistake quite a lot last year. If you think about long-form improv, once a character has appeared and become established, you have to bring them back. The audience has connected with them and want to see what happens to these characters. So we ended up a few times with shepherds becoming the hero that everyone was rooting for. But that would never happen in Shakespeare. The shepherd can't marry the princess; he has to suddenly become the son of a duke.

Rebecca In today's show, we had these two princesses who wanted to get married, and felt like they were never going to. And then it becomes obvious: we don't want them to marry people down the tavern; we need people of a similar rank for them to be able to get married – if that's going to be how it works out. If we want to provide the opportunity for that to happen, we have to bring in extra characters. But that's the thing, too: we're reluctant to create an enormous cast of characters when there're only five of us on stage.

We often have a scene at the beginning of each show to set the scene: Where are we? What does it feel like to be here? Are we in Italy, in Hartlepool? What's the state of things? We are in Hartlepool, and Hartlepool is infected; the harvest is blighted, which today ended up being due to the king's tyrannical rule – reflected in the fact that his children were blighted by disease. In our opening scene, we try to establish such things, and often those people would be of the shepherd type, and we may not see them again.

Gender and Drag

Something else I was interested in after the show today – where one of you ended up playing a princess and her suitor simultaneously, and the other ended up marrying a young duke played by an older woman—is this kind of gender play that you have going on, this cross-gender performance. Ailis, weren't you in the Reversed Shakespeare Company? That's precisely all about cross-dressing, isn't it?

Ailis Yes, I did a play with the Reversed Shakespeare Company last year where we swapped it around. And before I got to Edinburgh this year, I did a production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* that was gender blind. I was playing a man, and we had one man playing a woman and a couple of girls playing men. I think that's a thing that works well with Shakespeare, because obviously the original productions would have been all-male. So there's this kind of suspension of disbelief when the body of the actor does not reflect the gender of the character. That's something you can get away with a lot more in Shakespeare, where it's kind of a given, whereas with other genres of improv it can be a harder thing to overcome.

Rebecca It can be truly funny sometimes, when we end up as a female person playing a man, who then disguises himself as a woman. It's a bit like *Inception*: where does it stop?

Ailis [To Rebecca] Was it you and me in that show in Bristol, where we were playing men

who decided to disguise themselves as women? We had this whole scene about how we could pretend to be women.

Rebecca It became a game that we were playing in that one scene.

Ailis And again quite self-consciously so, because the reason why it was funny was that the audience knew: these are two female actors trying to play women, almost making fun of themselves. I'd be interested to see how cross-dressing by other improv companies is received compared to Impromptu. In my other group, Notflix, we are all female, which kind of removes the problem, because the audience assumes some of us are probably going to play men at some point. So we totally get away with it. But when we first started Notflix we weren't all female. We always played gender blind, and in rehearsals, none of us even thought twice about it; if a character felt like they were male, you were a man.

But we had a couple of shows where the audience found it weird. I remember, in one of the early Notflix shows, stepping on with one of the male actors. It was very clear from the character dynamics in the scene that we were both men; we were brothers, quite competitive brothers. And so he gave me a male name, but the audience thought that he was being funny, although he hadn't said it as a joke. It's as if they couldn't quite suspend their disbelief in a way that, with Shakespeare, everyone assumes that they can.

Rebecca In Impromptu, when we dress up as men, we might get a bit of a titter about it but no one really thinks twice. But when a guy throws on a skirt, all of a sudden that is *hilarious*! It's changing a bit, even over the years that we've been doing Impromptu. And that's partly, I think, because the guys are playing less for laughs. It's really hard for them if they want to honestly play, seriously play a woman, which they do, without people thinking it's for gags.

Ailis Yes, I think it's true they've got to work a bit harder. John [Lomas] does it quite a lot. In



Impromptu Shakespeare.
James Irving and Tom
Wilkinson. Photo: Robert
Stafford, 2017.

one of the shows recently, he was the lead, the heroine. He came on in a dress and everyone immediately laughed. Then he had to work really hard for the rest of the scene. After that, the audience were OK, but the initial response is always 'That's funny', whereas with us dressed up as men, it's not.

Rebecca No, not in the same way.

Ailis: Unless we do it in a comic way. If I step up in a waistcoat, that's not a problem. But whenever John steps up as a woman, everyone immediately thinks it's hilarious. He wasn't in the show today, but he is massive. How tall is he? He's, like, six-foot-four. So when he puts on a dress everyone bursts out laughing. He did some great, serious female characters last year, but he had to work really hard.

Rebecca Especially if he wants to play an actual protagonist or a kind of grieving

widow. If he's playing a comic character or some kind of low character, it's easier.

Ailis It's interesting, isn't it? Broadly speaking, there's something about Shakespeare, where people are more easily able to get past cross-gender performance in a way they are not with more naturalistic genres of improv. I'm thinking even about other improv groups I've seen at the Fringe: not a lot cross-dress.

Yes, I was thinking about Austentatious, the Jane Austen improvised company. They do it only one night a year, but generally they don't cross-dress at all.

Ailis Because of the genre they are working in, too. Cross-dressing is not a thing in Jane Austen, so people would find it a bit jarring if they did. You wouldn't expect one of the Austentatious guys putting on a dress halfway through the show, unless it was for a very obvious reason.

Rebecca I don't know their work well enough, but I imagine they are taking into

account Jane Austen the writer, and also all the period drama films.

Ailis Cross-dressing is not something you associate with Austen at all, whereas with Shakespeare you obviously do: it's in the plays. We went to see *Showstopper* [another improv show] the other night, and suddenly I realized that they never cross-dress at all. I hadn't really thought about it before, but they always played their own gender. There's definitely something about Shakespeare, I'd say, that makes it easier.

Preparation for Improv

One thing I haven't asked you is: How do you prepare? Do you rehearse? I mean, does one rehearse improv?

Rebecca Yes, we do. What we do is not so much rehearsing as working together. We try to work different muscles—so we might focus on the language, or we might try to do insults, or metaphor and simile. We might work on trying to do some kind of stage writing, or dancing and movement. And then we try just to be able to improvise together. It makes such a difference when you have people who regularly improvise together. Even if we end up doing stuff that isn't in Shakespeare, it's still important for that sense of the group as a body that operates together. We have a day a month, although it would be great to do more.

Ailis We all live in different places, unfortunately.

But you're performing all the year around, right?

Rebecca It's crept up. We started out like a Fringe show mostly. But now we've got a residency at the Nursery Theatre in London,³ and we've got a kind of south-west tour that finishes with the Birmingham Improv Festival and the Bristol Shakespeare Festival. We've also done stand-alone gigs. Now it feels as if we are starting to engage more with the idea of touring, and operating all the year around.

Ailis Which is nice, because the more we work together, the easier it becomes.

Rebecca: It's nice to do it in the context of something like the Bristol Shakespeare Festival. It really feels like it's at home there now. We've done it two years in a row and it goes down really well. We've run workshops alongside, too. I love it when the show sits alongside actual Shakespeare performances; it's fun.

I cannot think of a better way to end: improv is Shakespeare and yet not 'real' Shakespeare, but above all, it is fun.

Thanks to Impromptu Shakespeare members Ailis Duff and Rebecca MacMillan for taking the time to do this interview during the always busy Edinburgh season.

Notes and References

1. Marina Cano, 'Austen and Shakespeare: Improvised Drama', in Marina Cano and Rosa García-Periago, eds., *Jane Austen and William Shakespeare: A Love Affair in Literature, Film, and Performance* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 239–67.

2. This interview was conducted on 8 August 2017 at Tevot House, also known as the Gilded Balloon Fringe Venue.

3. A centre for the teaching and promotion of improv in London.