The Synthetic Bard:
Dramatic Condensation from the Futurists to the Reduced Shakespeare Company

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Abstract:
The Futurists criticized Shakespeare as the epitome of passist drama in several of their manifestos, and, at times, followed up on their own proposal to reshape his dramaturgy through their synthetic techniques. The Reduced Shakespeare Company abridged the entire Bard’s oeuvre to a single evening, but without reference to the Futurists. This article, going beyond the usual placement of the American troupe within the framework of popular Shakespeare, views their work as a contemporary embodiment of the Futurist Synthetic Theatre.

Although Shakespeare is frequently quoted as stating that “brevity is the soul of wit,” in reality it is one of his characters who pronounces these words in an ironic context. Polonius contradicts their literal sense by adding a plethora of long–winded expressions to the simple statement that Hamlet is mad.¹ In truth, despite employing brevity locally as a rhetorical device (Smith), the Bard never really took it to a global level: after all, even his shortest play, The Comedy of Errors, remains a full–length work. But, due to its popularity, Shakespeare’s oeuvre has often inspired reactions and rewritings in a more or less parodic tone, many of which resorted to abbreviation. Among these, two artistic experiences in the last one hundred years stand out because they based their notion of theatre on extreme dramatic condensation: the Futurist Synthetic Theatre and the Reduced Shakespeare Company. Thus, what brings together early twentieth–century Italian Futurism² and a contemporary American troupe beyond their

¹ “POLONIUS. My liege, and madam, to expostulate / What majesty should be, what duty is, / Why day is day, night night, and time is time, / were nothing but to waste night, day, and time. / Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit, / and tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes, / I will be brief. Your noble son is mad. / Mad call I it, for to define true madness, / What is’t but to be nothing else but mad?” (Ham. 2.2.86–94). For the widespread appropriation of Shakespeare out of context in support of practically any agenda, see Drakakis.
² The movement was officially born on 20 February 1909 with the publication of The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism on the French newspaper Le Figaro and “was the first European avant–garde that aspired to embrace and penetrate reality in all its aspects” (Antonucci, Storia 17). Led by the indefatigable Marinetti, Futurism gradually attracted an extremely diverse group of artists whose creativity was applied to everything, from
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chronological distance is the exploration of the possibilities of the short play genre in its most diminutive form.1 Throughout the numerous manifestos penned by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and the Italian Futurists in relation to the theatre from 1911 onwards, the ghost of Shakespeare emerged frequently as the epitome of passéist drama.4 In The Futurist Synthetic Theatre (Il teatro futurista sintetico, 1915) the value of the playwright’s words was downplayed vis-à-vis the physical elements of the theatre building: “Our futurist theater jeers at Shakespeare [. . . ] but is inspired by red or green reflections from the stalls” (Flint 127). Years later, the manifesto After the Synthetic Theatre and the Theatre of Surprise, We Invent the Antipsychological, Abstract Theatre of Pure Elements and Tactile Theatre (Dopo il teatro sintetico e il teatro a sorpresa, noi inventiamo il teatro antipsicologico astratto di puri elementi e il teatro tattile, 1924) lashed out at Italian psychologism by criticizing its decrepit hamletisms (Marinetti 174). If these mentions were rather general, the most practical advice had come from The Variety Theatre (Il teatro di varietà, 1913): “boil all of Shakespeare down to a single act” (Flint 121).

This is exactly the direction pursued by the Reduced Shakespeare Company (RSC), with The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged).5 Since the show’s beginnings in the 1980s and its canonization in the 90s, the RSC has made synthesis the cornerstone of its success, but crucial resonances with the Futurist Synthetic Theatre have so far passed unnoticed by scholars. The Futurists defined the sintesi, and the RSC followed in the same track with several shows based on intense abridgement. In this article I argue that, although there was no direct contact between the two groups, the Futurists should be

3 The concept of short play has so far received little attention. Most of the available theoretical studies are devoted to the one-act play alone (see, for instance, Kozlenko or Schnetz), but the short play genre also includes farces, scenes, sintesi, or ten-minute plays, different names that depend on poetics or historical circumstances. In general, if a full-length play tends to occupy the entire time of the performance, a short play “calls for something else to occur in close chronotopic proximity, at least another play” (Boselli 69). A full-length work becomes a particular case of short play once it is condensed and abbreviated. For a succinct encyclopedia entry, see Neumann. For the significant intertextual and dialogic implications of emphasizing the broader genre of the short play, see Boselli 48–52.

4 D’Amico noted how, in nineteenth-century Italy, Shakespeare came to represent the entire foreign dramaturgy outside contemporary French playwrights such as Sardou, Dumas fils, or Augier (35). Ibsen was another well-known playwright and he was also mentioned in the Futurist Synthetic Theatre manifesto.

5 An alternative, abbreviated title has often been used for productions: The Compleat Works of Wllm Shkspr (abridged).
regarded as the RSC’s immediate generic antecedents since the results are strikingly similar on the level of their dramaturgical output.

For our purposes, the role of Shakespeare is two-fold. In the first place, it is metonymic, as it would be impossible to speak of the whole Synthetic Theatre or all of the RSC productions for reasons of space. It is therefore just the tip of the iceberg, but by no means exhausts the potential for analysis. At the same time, referring to the English playwright is also necessary, since the bulk of materials available from, or on, the RSC pertains to their first, Shakespearean, show. Thus, an investigation of the conflictual relation with Shakespeare’s lengthiness can function as a useful platform for comparison, a trait d’union between theory and practice across the Atlantic in search of the vitality of dramatic synthesis.

Influences upon and from Futurist theatre

THESEUS. Say, what abridgement have you for this evening?
A Midsummer Night’s Dream (5.1.39)

The whole matter of reciprocal influences – who inspired the Futurists and who was inspired by them – is quite intricate, and this topic has already been explored in some depth. The general tendency to explore shorter dramatic forms since the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the limited reel length of a cinema in its infancy with its adaptations of classics including Shakespeare, different kinds of popular entertainment, or the contest for complete plays of maximum fifty lines by Comoedia in 1911, all could be considered general starting points for the Futurist imagination.

According to Angelo Maria Ripellino, for instance, during Marinetti’s visit to Meyerhold’s Studio in Moscow at the beginning of 1914, the founder of Futurism was shown “a pantomimic compendium of Antony and Cleopatra’s vicissitudes, followed by a three-minute excerpt from Othello improvised upon

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6 See at least Antonucci’s History of Futurist Theatre (Storia del teatro futurista 143–69), which analyzes possible sources for the Futurist theatre and their relation to subsequent playwrights and avant-garde movements. For a more specific account of the myriad possible inspirations for the Synthetic Theatre, see Verdone’s “La sintesi” 143–46 and Lista’s La scène 185–90.

7 Holland indicates that “from 1899, when a small part of Tree’s production of King John was filmed, to the end of the silent era, there were hundreds of Shakespeare films, ranging in length from two to over 100 minutes in length, all marked, of necessity, by a radical abbreviation of the language to what could be mouthed by the actors and read off the intertitles” (39). The video Silent Shakespeare by the British Film Institute contains “the pick of the bunch – Italian productions of ‘King Lear’ and ‘The Merchant of Venice,’ which are brought to life with extraordinary hand-stenciled color” (Bate). Bate finds that “the simplification of structure offers the potential of taking the viewer to the core of each play, revealing the primal quality of Shakespeare’s stories.”
his request‖ (168). Ripellino wondered if that experience might have influenced Marinetti’s conception of the Synthetic Theatre, but several scholars have noted that references to the notion of dramaturgical reduction already existed in Futurist manifestos as early as 1911. In fact, in the Manifesto of Futurist Playwrights (Manifesto dei drammaturghi futuristi), later renamed The Pleasure of Being Booed (La voluttà d’essere fischiati), the Futurists suggested that “[t]he dramatic art ought not to concern itself with psychological photography, but rather to move toward a synthesis of life in its most typical and most significant lines. [. . .] Dramatic art without poetry cannot exist, that is, without intoxication and without synthesis” (Flint 114). But it is not always so easy to establish if and how a particular concept or element has been employed as a basis for a specific artistic development.

We can find another example of improbable connection in terms of brevity in the nineteenth century with Gian Pietro Lucini. Lucini has been counted as one of the possible sources for Futurist synthetism (Verdone, “La sintesi” 143–44; Lista, La scènè 186) because he wrote a section of his Book of Ideal Figurations (Il libro delle figurazioni ideali 1894) about the story of Romeo and Juliet. Lucini concentrated in a markedly symbolist mode on the single episode of the balcony, the perfect moment between the end of the night and daybreak. If we accept that Marinetti might have had the fragment in his mind and even counted Lucini among the Futurists in light of their common dislikes,9 we would still be hard pressed to see how the passage could seriously contribute to the idea of the Synthetic Theatre. In the first place, the episode is not independent, but is part of a longer miscellany. It is, in fact, the second of five parts of the Intermezzo of Spring (Intermezzo della Primavera), and, in its section, is preceded by a brief narrative introduction from Matteo Bandello’s Novelle. Thus, it is more a rewriting of a select particularly poetic episode according to a different sensibility than a critique to the lengthiness of classic dramaturgy. With ambiguity that only literature isolated from the real stage can afford, Lucini has the characters act and sing (“Agunt et Cantant” 31) without specifying when they do one or the other. He entrusts a considerable part of the action to a chorus of “Night Souls” who recount the few events, but leaves very little to dialogue. In truth, Lucini did not write the action for the stage at all.

In the early 1910s, variety theatre was the first real starting point for the Futurists’ dramaturgical reflection, because, with its open format, it suggested a way of connecting the commercial circuit with the ideas explored in their irreverent serate.10 At the time of the early manifestos, Ettore Petrolini, a

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8 If not otherwise indicated, translations are my own.
10 The serate were a way for the Futurists to spectacularize just about anything in a loose structure: readings of manifestos, poetry declamation, or exhibitions of paintings. For a
performer who had started his career in the variety halls of Rome, had already surpassed the stereotypes of standard macchiette\textsuperscript{11} thanks to an idiosyncratic, anti-naturalist style made of frequent use of nonsense, *slittamento* from his characters – his term for what today would be called Brechtian alienation – and even direct attacks on spectators annoyed by his unconventional attitude. Such unpleasantness (*sgradevolezza*) and the progression of his career assuredly had a lot in common with the Futurists’ readiness to despise the audience and be booed when proposing “an absolute innovative originality” (*Pleasure*, Flint 114).

Despite his lack of a formal education, Petrolini’s strength was rooted in a keen observation of society and absorption of current cultural trends. Although his *Amleto* was inspired by another work and written partly in regular verse – practices stigmatized by the *Manifesto of Futurist Playwrights*\textsuperscript{12} – the *macchietta* was certainly innovative in its approach as it cast off any subordination to the original with its corrosive attitude and, of course, extreme brevity. Written in collaboration with Libero Bovio and presented between 1912 and 1914, *Amleto* started with three rhyming quatrains in which Petrolini mocked, in sequence, the traditional portrayal of Hamlet, three of the most renowned Italian great actors, and even himself, the last resort for the banished character:

I am the pale Danish prince  
Who speaks alone, who dresses in black.  
Who enjoys brawls, and goes, for fun,  
to the cemetery.  
If I play cards, it’s solitaire  
I can play the entire Yone by ear.  
If I want to do something fun  
I have breakfast with my dead dad.  
Gustavo Modena, Rossi, Salvini  
Tired of loving blond Ophelia  
Maybe in earnest, maybe as a joke

\textsuperscript{11} “Following the decline of the commedia dell’arte, the Italian popular stage had been flooded with singer-comedians who developed the art of the *macchietta*, portraits of common people who usually had eccentric but none the less good-natured character traits” (Berghaus 205).

\textsuperscript{12} “All the dramatic works built on a cliché or that borrow their conception, plot, or a part of their development from other works of art are wholly contemptible [...]. Regular prosodic forms should be excluded. The Futurist writer in the theater will therefore employ *free verse*” (Flint 114).
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Told me “Go away, with Petrolini, of the eenie meenie.”

After a sarcastic reference to the ghost of Hamlet’s father – “The cock sings. My father has laid an egg. He’s there, he appears in the guise of a ghost” (“Il gallo canta. Il padre mio ha fatto l’uovo. È là, mi si presenta sotto le spoglie di un fantasma”) – and an ostensibly serious promise to avenge him, Petrolini/Hamlet quickly overcomes the mourning for his incestuous mother and wonders why half of humanity has spent their entire life pondering on the “to be or not to be” dilemma. “Could one be more distressed, more querulous, more melancholy than Hamlet?” asks the performer ironically (“Si può essere più afflitti, più lagnosi, più melanconici di Amleto?).

With its caustic satire reduced to a few lines, a macchietta like this was definitely more likely to furnish inspiration for The Variety Theatre. This Futurist manifesto put forward many of the ideas that would be perfected in the later programmatical writings: the concepts of synthesis and subtlety, rhythm and speed, parody, or even destruction of dramatic themes and rules, and, most importantly, a crucial closeness between stage and audience. The revitalization of classic masterpieces could be achieved through genre mixture, simplification, and drastic length reduction within the frame of the music-hall: “Systematically prostitute all of classic art on the stage, performing for example all of the Greek, French, and Italian tragedies, condensed and comically mixed up, in a single evening” (Flint 121). Shakespeare, as we have seen, was to be abbreviated to a single act. The Futurist proposal to transform variety theatre into a theatre of amazement, record-setting, and body-madness was embodied by Petrolini, but a more solid collaboration with him and other performers like Luciano Molinari and Odoardo Spadaro did not start until the Futurists had honed their ideas and proposed actual dramatic works in conjunction with the next manifesto dedicated to the theatre.

The Futurist Synthetic Theatre, written by Marinetti, Emilio Settimelli, and Bruno Corra, spelled out the quintessence of Futurism applied to the performing

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13 “Io sono il pallido prence danese, / che parla solo, che veste a nero. / Che si diverte nelle contese, / che per diporto va al cimitero. / Se giuoco a carte fo il solitario / suono ad orecchio tutta la Jone. / Per far qualcosa di ameno e gaio / col babbo morto fo colazione. / Gustavo Modena, Rossi, Salvini / stanchi di amare la bionda Ofelia / forse sul serio o / forse per celia / mi han detto vattene, con Petrolini, dei salamini‖ (35). The Jone (v.6) was an opera by Enrico Pratella (1858). In the translation, I substituted a “Y” for the “I,” which, in Italian, indicates a semivowel and not a palatal consonant as in English. I salamini was a sketch first presented by Petrolini in Milan in 1908, here translated with a sound to rhyme with the performer’s name.

14 Because the macchietta predated the manifesto, it cannot be that Petrolini was here inspired by the Futurist theorizations as in Verdone, “La sintesi” 146.

15 For a detailed account of Petrolini’s and other variety theatre performers’ contacts with the Futurists, see Lista’s Petrolini and, more briefly, Berghaus 205–08.
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arts and unleashed a scathing attack on realistic drama with its excessive concern for character psychology. In addition, the traditional structure made of minute subdivisions and predictable crescendos seemed insufficient to capture modern life’s chaotic fragmentation and exuberance. Convinced that “mechanically, by force of brevity, we can achieve an entirely new theater,” the three authors envisioned a type of drama whose fulcrum was synthesis: “Synthetic. That is, very brief. [. . .] Our acts [atti] can also be moments only a few seconds long [attimi]” (Flint 124). It ventured beyond linear logic, relying on the notions of speed, dynamism, and simultaneity. If the Manifesto of Futurist Playwrights had been a bold flight of imagination, given that there were no Futurist playwrights yet, and The Variety Theatre had sought to appropriate an existing type of entertainment, the two volumes of Futurist Synthetic Theatre published between 1915 and 1916 contained as many as seventy-nine sintesi, actual works that claimed an absolute originality and no reference outside themselves.

The hundreds of sintesi subsequently produced responded to the most diverse directions of experimentation, depending on the interests of their many authors that ranged from extreme textual simplification to pure abstraction. Scholars have tried, with some success, to categorize them. Suffice it to say that a significant group of sintesi directly attacked previous literary and dramatic models. Some of the most recognizable examples were (in parentheses their targets and edition): Sicilian Play (Dramma siciliano) by Bruno Aschieri (as parody of Verga’s Rustic Chivalry [Cavalleria rusticana] and Verism; Aschieri 20), Last Tragedy of Adultery (Ultima tragedia dell’adulterio) by Ardengo Soffici (vs. the bourgeois triangle conventions; Verdone, Avanguardie 33); The Jesters’ Supper (La cena delle beffe) by Angelo Rognoni (vs. the homonymous play by Sem Benelli; Verdone 108); Melodrama (Dramma) by Cesare Cerati (vs. Madama Butterfly, and the excesses of opera in general; Verdone 115); Sacred Play (Dramma sacro) by Giorgio Carmelich (vs. sacra rappresentazione; Verdone 143); and Alfieri’s ‘Saul’ (Il “Saul” di Alfieri) by Giuseppe Steiner (vs. Alfierian tragedy; Kirby 307–08).

On the topic of Shakespeare, apart from potential thematic consonances or language references such as “why can’t you be here and not be here” (Paroxysm

16 Verdone, who observes that each sintesi is “an exploratory expedition into a different continent” (Teatro del tempo futurista 165), divides Futurist theatre in six categories: “1. grotesque and eccentric, 2. absurd, 3. occult and magickal, 4. abstract, 5. filmic and visionic, 6. ideological and polemical” (99–129); Gordon, who finds these labels misleading because the sintesi “almost always fall in more than one group,” analyzes them in terms of “structure, character, space, language, and message” (354).

17 See for instance Mario Dessy’s Madness (La pazzia, Verdone, Teatro italiano 72) for Hamlet, or My Wife Chee-Chee (Mia moglie Cici) by Pippo Juch (Verdone, Avanguardie 137–38) and Jealousy (Jalousie) written in French by Carlo Bruno (Lista Théâtre II, 10–11) for Othello.
[Parossismo], Chiti, *La vita* 92), it is somewhat surprising to discover that the
English playwright is less visible than in the manifestos, although, in the Italian
context, he was obviously more a symbol of theatre in general. Only one
author – to my knowledge – made a clear and direct reference. In 1916, Angelo
Rognoni wrote *Amleto*, a “synthetic devaluation” (20) in which the frightening
scene of Act I is reduced to the level of absolute normality. As a consequence,
since Amleto could care less about his father’s ghostly appearance, the whole
tragedy does not need to advance, and brevity is guaranteed:

A remote location on the ramparts in front of Elsinore Castle.
– Hamlet is walking and meditating. The Ghost appears stage right.
HAMLET *(noticing him)* – Good evening, dad.
GHOST *(majestically)* – Shut up, son. This is not me. I am the ghost of
myself.
HAMLET *(with indifference)* – Really? Pretty odd, isn’t it?
*Curtain.*

For other strictly Shakespearean examples, one has to turn to playwright and
humorist Achille Campanile, who was not part of the Futurist group, but,
starting in 1924, employed the synthetic techniques in his pointed *Two-Liner
Tragedies* (*Tragedie in due battute*). A Bardian reference, although not explicit
in the title, is *The Pensive Prince* (*Il principe pensieroso*). This “tragedy” picks
a typical trait of Hamlet’s character and makes it the reason for an answer based
on a misunderstanding of the signified. After a long stage direction that
describes the castle room and the characters’ poses, Il Gran Ciambellano says:
“Your Highness… [= the same word for “height” in Italian] / THE PRINCE
awakening from his meditations, sadly: Five feet, two and a half inches. / (Curtain)” (72). Another kind of devaluation is *Hamlet at the Trattoria* (*Amleto in trattoria*), which puts the famous character in the low setting of a
tavern, decreases the focus on him by adding other people, and reserves the

18 Such limited presence is, however, a general situation according to Lanier: “for all his
symbolic significance, Shakespeare is not a dominant component of popular culture.
Even if we count generously, Shakespearian adaptations and allusions appear in a
relatively small percentage of the mass media’s overall output, and those appearances are
often scattered unevenly throughout the range of cultural production” (18–19).
19 Rognoni was the founder, with Gino Soggetti, of the journal *The Futurist Folgore* (*La
Folgore futurista*) in Pavia, which published *sintesi* and words-in-liberty (Bossaglia 15).
20 “Un luogo remoto della piattaforma dinnanzi al Castello di Elsinore. / AMLETO
(scorgendolo) – Buona sera, babbo. / SPETTRO (maestoso) – Taci, ragazzo. Io non sono io; sono lo spettro di me
stesso. / AMLETO (con indifferenza) – To’, è un bel caso anche questo. / Sipario.”
21 “Altezza... / IL PRINCIPE riscotendosi dalle sue meditazioni, tristemente: Un metro e
sessanta. / (Sipario)”
higher style for the waiter, who wittily excuses himself for the minuscule chicken he has served:

Characters:
HAMLET
WAITER
CUSTOMERS, WAITERS, CIGAR MAKER, ETC.
In a Danish trattoria, at lunch time.
HAMLET
examining the microscopic chicken served to him:
Waiter, what is this that you have served me?
WAITER
Oh, Sir, it was a chicken, but now it’s dead, peace be to its soul, and it is nothing now.
(Curtain)22

The Synthetic Theatre perfectly cohered with the exaltation of the beauty of speed and modern life advocated in *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* (*Fondazione e manifesto del futurismo*, 1909) and with the love for abbreviation and summary in *Destruction of Syntax Imagination without Strings Words-in-Freedom* (*Distruzione della sintassi Immaginazione senza fili Parole in libertà*, 1913): “Tell me everything, quick, *in two words!*” (Marinetti 69). Beyond sheer textual reduction, one strength of the *sintesi* resided in their oppositional stance against the authority of tradition, dullness, and linear logic, all barricaded behind too many words. Nevertheless, once the micro-plays became available, implementation by professional practitioners remained a challenge.

In the first place, a revolution still based on drama alone was unable to generate Futurist actors as quickly as needed. Some *sintesi* were incorporated in variety shows, but the experiment was confined to a handful of independent performers practically ignored by critics. When Marinetti and Co. tried to recruit regular professional companies, these could not afford to entirely abandon the passéist plays that guaranteed their profits, nor to risk that their best artists be booed. Thus, they resorted to less experienced actors. In sum, the best performers of the *sintesi* remained their authors (Puppa 13). Furthermore, when the impresarios could be convinced to risk the integrity of their premises, the din made by the rowdy audience – comprised by people too fond of the bellicose

22 Personaggi: / AMLETO / IL CAMERIERE / AVVENTORI, CAMERIERI, SIGARAIO, ecc. / In una trattoria di Danimarca, all’ora del pranzo. / AMLETO esaminando il microscopico pollo che gli è stato servito: / Cameriere, che è questo che m’avete servito? / IL CAMERIERE / Oh, signore, era un pollo, ma ora è morto, pace all’anima sua, e non è più niente. / (Sipario)
atmosphere launched by the serate – often prevented any real appreciation of the plays.

Most importantly, the construction of a dedicated space, the “great metal building” (Flint 129) called for by the Futurist Synthetic Theatre remained an unfulfilled fantasy, because the Futurist scenographers were not yet ready for an active collaboration with the playwrights. A revolving stage, said Settimelli, could have been a solution, but the costs were outside the Futurists’ reach (qtd. in Verdone “La sintesi...” 158). Hence, the most striking paradox was that the scene changes between the sintesi thwarted much of their concept because the intervals lasted longer than the plays themselves: about thirty minutes of actual performance needed as long as two hours of intervals (Antonucci, Cronache 20 n.17).

All in all, the revolution represented by the sintesi remained at the textual level, but, despite these drawbacks, the theoretical clarity achieved about brevity at the theatre was unparalleled. Even if the Futurists did not exclusively discover brevity but only pushed stylistic boundaries in that direction, their manifestos and the sheer number of their sintesi made the notion of extreme dramatic abbreviation into a solid dramaturgical tool that became available to subsequent playwrights and avant-garde movements.23

But this achievement did not necessarily imply a recognition for “the creative importance of the Futurist Synthetic Theatre, the only and decisive revolution in the theatre of [the twentieth] century” (Marinetti et al. 4). In a sense, the group had set the example by presenting themselves as absolute innovators, ready to be discarded after ten years.24 When the time came for a generational change, however, Marinetti could not resist and protested that other playwrights were plagiarizing Futurist ideas: in the case of Pirandello in 1924, the tone was softer,25 but, with Wilder’s Our Town in 1941, Marinetti roared like an old lion.26

23 In 1973 Giovanni Lista wrote: “Futurism claims the theatrical sintesi as its exclusive creation because of the position it occupied within the theatrical activity of the movement (at the current state of research, one can in fact count 56 authors and about 380 plays between the published ones and those that remained in manuscript form)” (“Le théâtre...” 40).

24 “The oldest of us is thirty: so we have at least a decade for finishing our work. When we are forty, other younger and stronger men will probably throw us in the wastebasket like useless manuscripts—we want it to happen!” (Founding... Flint 43). De Maria points out how Marinetti was “always reluctant to acknowledge the deep influences of others upon his works, and inclined instead to acknowledge the superficial influences” (LXIX).

25 “the audience who now applaud Pirandello’s new play, are also applauding his Futurist idea that consists in having the audience take part in the play’s action. Let the audience remember that this idea comes from the Futurists” (After the Synthetic Theatre... Marinetti 170).

26 “I deemed indispensable and urgent [. . .] to repeatedly and loudly take the floor during the performance of Our Town by the American playwright Wilder in order to denounce the shameless plagiarism of Futurist technical inventions” (“Rowdy Evening at Teatro
and forgot the positive impression he had formed about Americans and their openness to new artistic theories.\textsuperscript{27} In the meantime, through a series of eclipses and rediscoveries, Futurism has managed to become part of critical awareness, and Futurist suggestions have been implemented for the first time by others. In the case of all of Shakespeare in one act, the founding of the Reduced Shakespeare Company has been crucial for the idea to become a tangible reality.

\textit{From the historical avant-garde to pop culture}

\textit{Hamlet.} for look, where my abridgement comes

\textit{Hamlet} (2.2.438)

Anyone reading the \textit{Synthetic Theatre Manifesto} and familiar with the Futurist synthetic techniques could appreciate the stylistic and generic kinship with the RSC productions and I will try to bring some of the similarities to the fore in the next section. However, the connection is by no means straightforward, and, as a result, has been overlooked.\textsuperscript{28} Clearly, since Shakespeare has been so influential, it would take several volumes to identify in detail all consonances through different countries, cultures, and times. Therefore, this can only be a brief and simplified sketch of a few significant elements.

In his introduction to a collection of Marinetti’s writings, Luciano De Maria summed up the Futurists’ impact on European movements: “beyond nationalistic infatuations and stubborn and incompetent denigrations, it seems a reasonable argument that Futurism can be considered as a sort of propeller or general catalyst of European avantgardes” (xxxviii). But the influence of Futurism crossed the Atlantic as well. In the United States, Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner reevaluated the Futurists’ contribution to the American neo-avant-garde in the 1960s; more recently, Jeffrey Schnapp has been one of the most alert scholars of Futurism, while the University of California in general,

\begin{quote}
Argentina in Rome in Defense of the Primacy of Italian Theatre” “Tumultuosa serata al Teatro Argentina di Roma in difesa del primato teatrale italiano” Marinetti et al. 3).
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\textsuperscript{27} “Less easily discouraged, less vile but subtler raisonneurs, Americans took part in the worldwide debate by resolutely applauding Futurism, and, despite lamenting as a weakness of theirs the lack of a classical and glorious tradition, they praised those children of old Europe who showed at last the need for making a clean sweep of an overly revered and overly imitated past” (“Futurist Preface…” Marinetti 27). The admiration for the American intellectual attitude was shared by Chiti, who spoke of the “the healthy unrestrainable American curiosity, nothing else but a truthfully modern and profound artistic instinct” (\textit{I creatori} 10).

\textsuperscript{28} The Neo-Futurists are another contemporary American group, based in Chicago and New York City, who utilize synthetic techniques, but, in their case, they declare their source of inspiration in their name.
the Getty Center in Los Angeles, and other enlightened sections of academe have endeavored to keep the Futurist legacy alive.

Yet this does not necessarily imply that Futurism has gained any strong presence among the general populace. During the summer of 2010, I interviewed Daniel Singer, the Californian founder of the RSC. He candidly admitted that, although he had formal training, his theatre history education was largely self-taught, and, somehow, he missed the Futurist movement entirely. My mention was the first he had heard of it. What is more striking, however, is that none of the reviews of the troupe’s shows, both American and British, ever mentioned the Synthetic Theatre. In fact, the RSC has rather been seen through the lens of popular culture within the strictly Anglo-Saxon tradition of Shakespearean abridgement.

Peter Holland’s chapter “Shakespeare abbreviated” begins as early as the first two decades of the seventeenth century, when the English Comedians playing across continental Europe regularly adapted Shakespearean plays (30). Evidently, the plots lent themselves to German and Dutch contexts where, due to the lack of purposely built playhouses, the troupes “performed in town squares and inn yards, tennis-courts and palaces, on temporary structures created anywhere an audience might be found. The earliest plays have the quality of variety show, demonstrations of performance skills (acting, clowning, singing, dancing, and other musical numbers) [. . .]. They are also short” with reductions of about 80 percent (31). An even more advanced shortening came in 1769 from David Garrick, actor-manager of the Drury Lane Theatre in London, who included in The Jubilee – a celebratory afterpiece – a procession representing as many as nineteen plays. The multilayered A Midsummer Night’s Dream, for instance, consisted simply of “Bottom with ass’s head and banner, sixteen fairies with banners, chariot drawn by butterflies, king and queen of the fairies in the chariot” accompanied by a brief moment of wordless action (38). These two examples show one of the main reasons why drama was usually abbreviated: the necessity imposed by practical circumstances. The English Comedians needed shows for improvised stages, and Garrick arrived at the above minimal version of A Midsummer Night’s Dream as a way to recoup money after a few “desperate attempts” to make other less extreme reductions work (38). Apparently, in Garrick’s time, Shakespeare’s comedies did not function commercially as full texts (37).

It is through the practical necessities of production that Douglas Lanier noted parallels between the RSC and earlier approaches: “The Reduced Shakespeare Company has its origins in pass-the-hat performances at Renaissance fairs in California in 1981. The fast-paced, participatory mode of performance demanded by this venue, not unlike innyard performances in Elizabethan England, has remained a hallmark of the company’s style” (102). Time was indeed a paramount limitation and Singer, in envisioning the original RSC show, “was mindful of the way that event scheduled their entertainment in half-hour
blocks.” Another influence directly bearing on brevity was “[t]he advent of the rapidly-edited MTV music-video” and the freedom afforded by film-editing techniques might as well be a logical continuation of Futurist synthetism. However, if one definite Italian influence was there, it was Commedia dell’Arte. Singer explained that:

[t]hose heydays at the California Faires had a strict historical bent [. . .] so commedia dell’arte was already a staple there. It was a natural leap for us to adopt the classic commedia characters, devise ridiculous plots with lots of jokes, and do the broadest imaginable slapstick complete with traditional masks and outrageously bad Italian accents. The form was ideal for our boundless energy and our commedias were exuberant. [. . .] When you perform extreme comedy like that, over and over, you learn an amazing repertory of movement and timing. Commedia is great training for comic performers.

Commedia’s scenarios, the succinct lists of actions that served as bases for the fully-acted plays, are in themselves exemplary models of brevity, but the reference can also extend to the use of commedia techniques by anti-naturalistic movements including Futurism. Lia Lapini remarks that The Variety Theatre Manifesto “fully belongs to the tradition of the European theatrical avant-garde, in which the popular forms of Commedia dell’Arte, circus, and carnival – whose modes [. . .] converge in variety theatre and cabaret – become the models of the new entertainment and of all avant-garde theatre practice from Meyerhold to Brecht” (51).

Thus, the rich texture of popular culture offers the most direct general connection between the Futurists and the RSC. In his booklet The Creators of Futurist Theatre (I Creatori del Teatro Futurista, 1915), Remo Chiti claimed a broad popular basis for the movement: “Futurism, anti-traditional and anti-academic movement, [. . .] is a spontaneous product of our civilization, a great organism, the expression of many and not the ‘weird apparel’ of an artistic clique” (5–6). Indeed, a basic attitude underlies both the Futurists’ and the RSC’s approach to Shakespeare, namely the opposition to high culture. Lanier remarked that “[b]ecause [. . .] Shakespeare symbolizes high art in general, the distinction between ‘Shakespeare’ and ‘popular culture’ epitomizes one of the great divides in the culture of the last century, the division between highbrow and lowbrow” (3). Yet, “Shakespeare per se is not the object of critique. Rather, these appropriations target the sorts of social and interpretive decorum that govern how high art is treated, as well as those who enforce that decorum, authority figures like teachers, intellectuals, antiquarians, actors, and bluebloods” (54).

In this conflictual, modernist relationship with authority the Futurists and the RSC also share common ground. Even though Shakespeare was indeed part of
popular culture in his own time, the playwright’s “de-popularization” started in England during the Victorian period when “the Globe edition, the first Shakespeare edition supervised by university scholars” was published in 1864, and “English was [...] institutionalized as a discipline with Shakespeare at its centre, at Cambridge in 1878 and Oxford in 1884” (40). In the meantime, following Garrick’s model, “Shakespeare, the idea of theatrical stardom, [...] and the organization of theatrical companies become intertwined. Increasingly theatrical companies were organized around a star or stars who managed the troupe, took the lead roles, and established their eminence through skill in performing Shakespeare” (33). When the Futurists targeted Shakespeare, they were referring to practically the same situation in Italy, where the matatori felt entitled to tweak and twist the English playwright as a vehicle to enhance their personal success.

With all the pompousness attached to Shakespeare, it is not surprising that the nineteenth century produced a host of parodies as mockery of authority and, at the same time, definitive sanction of the distinction between popular Shakespeare and Shakespeare ‘proper’ (38–39). These burlesques “on American shores [...] quickly became wedded to the minstrel show form, with, predictably, Othello as a frequent object of ridicule and the contrast between Shakespearian verse and African-American dialect a source of racist humour” (38). At the same time, parody clearly indicated an intimate familiarity with Shakespeare’s drama (Levine 59).

Subsequently, the highbrow/lowbrow divide continued to present itself in waves. In her exploration of the many strands of “Shakespop,” Elizabeth Abele noticed how “during the first part of the twentieth century American popular culture excluded the Bard, relegating him to distinct theatrical productions in select, major cities attended by well-behaved, passive, highbrow audiences,” before “this cultural hierarchy became more varied beginning in the 1960s” with “the production of Broadway musicals like West Side Story, [...] and the rise of Shakespearean companies like the New York Shakespeare Festival (established by Joseph Papp)” (3). As for the RSC, Lanier recalls that it “was formed during the Reagan 1980s, the era of ‘culture wars’ between traditionalists and progressives within which Shakespeare symbolized the literary canon embattled on the one side by radical interpretive innovation and on the other by encroaching popular culture. Compleat Works is of special interest for its negotiation of that battlefield” (104).

29 Purcell points out that “[m]any of the dialogic and carnivalesque performance modes associated with the puncturing irreverence of parody – clowning, innuendo, politically subversive jokes, audience complicity, self-reflexivity – were features of Shakespearean performance in the first place, and in some instances, Shakespeare’s own carnivalesque sequences have been performed with all the anarchic disrespect of a parody, while not actually being ‘parodied’ in any literal sense at all” (99).
If the attempt to pull the highbrow culture down from its pedestal is similar, one big difference between the Futurist avant-garde and the RSC is in the scope accorded to artistic action. The Futurists, taking the cue from D’Annunzio’s “life as work of art,” veered towards the “art-action” formula, with the aim of empowering the artist to interfere directly with reality, to the point of actually conceiving a complete identification between art and life in the political arena (Lapini 26). For the Futurists, synthesis was a consequence of an aesthetic revolution based on the admiration for the new technologies and the speed of the Machine. By contrast, the RSC’s initial reason for abbreviation was utterly practical when they “discovered a definite relationship between fast pacing, the laugh quotient, and the number of dollars that went into the hat at each performance” (Londré 54). The Futurists theorized first, and then wrote the sintesi; the RSC were trying to make a living as full-time performers and discovered that maximum synthesis could allow them to be successful. For the Futurists, the attempt to reshape the entire world through aesthetic means implied a much stronger opposition to tradition, using theatre as the most powerful type of propaganda; the RSC found themselves in a world where such desire had proved utopian because theatre had been pushed to the margins. Thus, their agenda was much more limited, in a “tension between reverence and resistance [that] is characteristic of Shakespop’s ambivalent use of Shakespeare” (Lanier 55). Consequently, the theoretical impact of the two groups differs widely.

As a result, the RSC’s work has been placed solely within the frame of Shakespop and remains a mere “subgenre” that “makes comedy of how much of the original text can be cut while still conveying its ‘spirit’” (Lanier 99). But what should we make of the later, non-Shakespearean shows that adopted the same concept of extreme abbreviation? It seems fitting, at this point, to look more closely at the genesis of The Complete Works and analyze it in view of the kinships with the synthetic genre officially inaugurated by the Futurists.

*The Reduced Shakespeare Company’s unwitting Futurist heritage*

“By the way, we think it’s hysterically funny that our work is now considered to be culturally significant” (Daniel Singer)

Two official documents of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* are currently available: one is a DVD of the show in its 2003 version and the other is a book that contains the original 1994 script, literally surrounded by a huge number of paratextual materials (Borgeson, Long, and Singer). The

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30 Marinetti claimed that 90 percent of Italians went regularly to the theatre (*Synthetic*, Flint 123).

31 All subsequent page numbers refer to this volume unless noted. The authors start by asking a rhetorical question: “there have been some 652 published editions of the Bard’s
first of these is an introduction that jokingly tells of the hardships the authors experienced in order to find an editor for their book. After they had purportedly asked, on ruled notebook paper, actor Kenneth Branagh, Queen Elizabeth, and the American actress Heather Locklear, they resorted to Professor J.M. Winfield. Despite officially appearing in the Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data (ii), Winfield is eventually revealed to be none other than Jess Borgeson himself behind a “fraudulent pseudonym” (136). This disclosure, in conjunction with the oddly numbered footnotes, and their exceedingly bogus content, leaves no doubt as to the group’s attitude towards academe, a point certainly in line with the Futurists’ desire to get rid of traditional scholarship.

The creation and development of the show began in 1981 when Daniel Singer, a California actor who had studied at the Guildford school near London, “was inspired by a production of Tom Stoppard’s The (Fifteen-minute) Dogg’s Troupe ‘Hamlet’ to write his own abbreviated version of Shakespeare’s masterpiece [. . .] and held auditions for his four-person, half hour Hamlet” (112–13). Initially, Singer hired Jeff Borgeson, “a disgruntled Shakespearean scholar at the University of California, Berkeley” (113), Michael Fleming, and Barbara Reinertson. On the day of the first performance in Novato, California, the actors selected the name of the troupe after discarding various other options, such as “Condensed (Just Add Water) Shakespeare Company” and “Joseph Papp’s New York Shakespeare Festival.” Instead of choosing plain concision or even opposition to the East Coast theatre mecca, the Reduced Shakespeare Company ended up with the same acronym as the Royal Shakespeare Company, the emblem of classic Shakespearean performance in England, thereby rendering Complete Works. [note 1: A wild guess] What possible justification can there be, ‘you ask, for this new volume?’ To which I reply: ‘It’s much, much shorter’” (xviii). At the same time, they also seem to have perfected Polonius’s habit of inflating a speech, and have added as many as six prefatory notes, one of which is the “Publisher’s Preface to the Foreword to the Authors’ Notes” which realizes that “the whole thing has gone terribly, terribly wrong” and suggests that the reader “skip directly to the script” (xix). At this time, the entire DVD is viewable at http://video.google.com (15 Sept. 2010).

32 In the meantime, Borgeson has officially adopted the nom de plume and is now known as Jess Winfield (Winfield).

33 In a spiraling progression from 1 to 99, then 180 to 199, 1180 to 1199, and finally 11180 to 11188.

34 “we want to free this land from its smelly gangrene of professors, archaeologists, ciceroni, and antiquarians. [. . .] set fire to the library shelves!” (Founding... Flint 42–43).

35 But see the other side of the same story: “The origins of the fun might be traced back to a Department of Dramatic Art production of Tom Stoppard’s The (15-Minute) Dogg’s Troupe Hamlet which gave Jess Borgeson his first role at the University of California, Berkeley. He used that material the following summer to audition for a half-hour Hamlet (same idea, different script) at a renaissance fair” (Londré 53).
their antagonism even more patent. Adam Long joined the troupe as a cross-dressing substitute when the only woman in the cast broke her ankle, and the number of actors later shrunk to three once it became clear that no one was really needed for the roles of Claudius and the Ghost.

After another experiment in Shakespearean reduction (a two-man version of *Romeo and Juliet* a year later), in 1987 the RSC was invited to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in Scotland, where a full-length work was required. Thus, the show was born as a fulfillment of its bold description for that event: “all 37 plays by three actors in one hour” (119). In March 1992, the RSC started “an unlimited engagement at the Arts Theatre in London’s West End” (121), and three months later, when Borgeson quit the show, not one person remained from the original cast. The ninety-minute performance on DVD is interpreted by Adam Long, Austin Tichenor, and Reed Martin, a performer with circus experience. “The Complete Works continued with various casts, finally closing at Piccadilly’s Criterion Theatre in 2005 as the longest-running comedy in the West End” (Winfield).

The RSC officially thanked Tom Stoppard “for bringing Bardian abridgment into the modern idiom” (vii) and for furnishing the initial inspiration for the show. Originally, his *The Dogg’s Troupe 15-Minute Hamlet* (1976) was “written (or rather edited) for performance on a double-decker bus” (Stoppard 7) for Ed Berman and the Inter-Action troupe. Of its three abbreviated versions.

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36 When the show premiered in London, *The Evening Standard* doubted that there would be room for two RSCs (qtd. in Borgeson 135). Lanier describes the Reduced Shakespeare Company as “a carnivalesque inversion of the Royal Shakespeare Company, unabashedly pop American, willfully amateurish, physically rather than textually oriented, parodically high-concept in its adaptations” (104). Notably, over time the Royal Shakespeare Company made various attempts to connect with popular culture, such as the Theatreground project (season 1969–70; Holland 27), or the acknowledgement of cinema as a reference for its marketing campaigns in its 1994 production of *Coriolanus* (Lanier 86). But it is in the interest of pop culture for highbrow and lowbrow to remain as distant as possible so as to maintain the potential for parody.

37 Singer so described his experience: “Tom Stoppard’s cutting was a revelation: it conveyed the essence of the plot and consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s most famous and familiar dialogue. Despite the actors playing their roles sincerely, the audience was amused by the script’s extreme brevity, and I thought: the Editor is getting laughs! Brilliant! […] Stoppard’s version gave me the confidence to create my own.”

38 The very idea of Shakespeare on a bus seems a direct derivation from Futurist aesthetics inspired by the Machine. Holland explains that “Ed Berman’s Fun Art Bus, [was] a double-decker converted into a theatre and part of a belated countercultural attempt to move performance out of conventional high-cultural theatre spaces and towards the hypothesized popular culture that radical theatre yearned to engage with. Its eventual first performance, adjacent to the National Theatre, by it but not in it, permitted by that central institution of socially approved theatre, signals its uneasy status” (40).
the first, and more avant-garde, is a prologue spoken by Shakespeare himself, which skips logical connections by condensing the play to a few highlights:

For this relief, much thanks.  
Though I am native here, and to the manner born,  
It is a custom more honoured in the breach  
Than in the observance  
Well.  
Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.  
To be, or not to be, that is the question.  
There are more things in heaven and earth  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy –  
There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough hew them how we will  
Though this be madness, yet there is method in it.  
I must be cruel only to be kind;  
Hold, as t’were, the mirror up to nature.  
A countenance more in sorrow than in anger.  
(LADY in audience shouts ‘Marmalade’.)
The lady doth protest too much.  
Cat will mew, and Dogg will have his day! (31–32)

Interpreted from the point of view of synthesis, possibly the “divinity” in v.10, the verses so combined could acquire other meanings, such as a justification of the seeming madness of the abbreviation (v. 12), or the realization that nature has accelerated and would need a different mirror even if it seems cruel (vv. 13–14). The second part is a more narrative editing, whereas the third offers a sped-up and comic encore of the same story.

Stoppard definitely made the point that Shakespeare could skillfully be tailored to any desired length and the effect was in tune with how the Futurists saw the function of variety theatre: “The Variety Theater destroys the Solemn, the Sacred, the Serious, and the Sublime in Art with a capital A. It cooperates in the Futurist destruction of immortal masterworks, plagiarizing them, parodying, making them look commonplace by stripping them of their solemn apparatus as if they were mere attractions” (Flint 119).

Paradoxically, however, Stoppard behaved more conservatively as a playwright in terms of length when he endeavored to integrate his reduction into the more elaborate, full-length work *Dogg’s Hamlet, Cahoot’s Macbeth*, first performed in 1979. Stoppard explains that “[t]he comma that divides Dogg’s

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39 The tripartite structure of the play has often gone unnoticed, as scholars perceived only a thirteen-minute first part capped by the two-minute encore (Gianakaris 227; Diamond 593).
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Hamlet, Cahoot’s Macbeth also serves to unite two plays which have common elements: the first is hardly a play at all without the second, which cannot be performed without the first” (7). This sentence unambiguously states that Dogg’s Hamlet, itself “a conflation of two pieces [. . .] Dogg’s Our Pet [. . .] and The Dogg’s Troupe 15-Minute Hamlet” (7), is so incomplete that it needs another “half-play” to sustain it. Stoppard was quite innovative in how he devised the composition of his work, but he did not particularly deem brevity a value in itself.\(^4\) Conversely, expansion for the RSC was not meant as an exercise in sheer lengthening, but rather as one that developed techniques of brevity: the more plays they decided to squeeze into the show’s duration, the more they were bound to reduce at all costs.

The language adopted by the American troupe – constantly just a step away from Marinetti and Co. – draws attention to their striking connections to Futurism all the more. Some excerpts from the accounts of the beginnings of the show follow; the added italics highlight what sounds very much like the Futurist experience, imbued with speed and artistic ruthlessness:

The creative interaction between the three of us was intense, fast-paced, absolutely electric. (Borgeson xxi)

At first, the task of such a massive condensation seemed hopeless, and I approached the words of the Bard meekly, cautiously, even with a sense of reverence. [. . .] The next day we assaulted the Bard of Avon like cultural guerillas on steroids. We tore madly into volume after volume of the Bard’s work. Blindly. Insanely. Embarrassingly. Now the smoke has cleared. The deed is done. / May the Bard forgive us. (Long xxii)

In 1981 I took a copy of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, tore out a few select pages, attacked them with a grease pencil, hired three total strangers and produced a sixteenth-century vaudeville show. [. . .] If the crowds had booted and thrown vegetables, as we had anticipated, this “play” (I use the term loosely) would never have been created. But audiences of the last quarter of the twentieth century apparently possessed an urgent need to see Shakespeare performed as if it were a Tex Avery cartoon, so the Reduced Shakespeare Company thrived. [. . .] there is excellent shock value in seeing a Great Shakespearean Scene reduced to two

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\(^4\) Stoppard’s original pieces were inspired by Wittgenstein’s philosophy (Dogg’s Hamlet) and by the Czechoslovakian playwright Pavel Kohout and his abbreviated Macbeth, written for performance in private apartments at a time of political repression (Cahoot’s Macbeth) (Stoppard 7–8). Although the original works were not synthetic, the intertextual relationship between the two would still belong to a discussion of the short play genre.
The Synthetic Bard

lines. (Singer xxiii)

The first quotation reminds one of the Futurists’ admiration for the beauty of speed (Founding… Flint 41) combined with the new resources of electricity, while the second and the third – apart from Singer echoing The Pleasure of Being Booed, The Variety Theatre, and Campanile’s two-liners – sound as if they were taken straight from a Futurist statement about the necessity for an aggressive, shocking cleanse of old aesthetics, such as the following one from The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism:

Except in struggle, there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece. Poetry must be conceived as a violent attack on unknown forces, to reduce and prostrate them before man. [. . .] We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind [. . .]. Take up your pickaxes, your axes and hammers, and wreck, wreck the venerable cities, pitilessly! (Flint 41–43)

We find similar consonances within the show. At the very beginning, Daniel proclaims: “we are going to attempt a feat which we believe to be unprecedented in the history of theatre. That is, to capture, in a single theatrical experience, the magic, the genius, the towering grandeur of ‘The Complete Works of William Shakespeare’” (2). If this were not enough, just a few minutes later, embedded in a humorous fire-and-brimstone evangelist speech, there is a visionary sentence worthy of a Futurist manifesto: “A glorious future! A future where this book (indicating the ‘Complete Works’) will be found in every hotel room in the world!” (5). Although the preamble still sounds very reverential, the performance soon demonstrates to what extent synthesis can be employed as a means to eliminate “the execrable effluvium of editorial excess” from a playwright who “used too many words” (xviii).

The structure of this Shakespearean variety show, especially in its first part, reproduces on the stage the distance covered by the RSC at the moment of editing the text, from moderate reverence to merciless guerrilla. Mel Gussow jokingly emphasized this violence of abbreviation: “Though everything is good-natured, the approach might be called one of Will-ful destruction, as the three R.S.C. clowns locate and then undermine the essence of each play. The pithier-than-Python parodies defolio Shakespeare.” It is open to debate whether the abbreviation of Shakespeare’s masterworks has resulted in a “puerile, shallow,

41 One example among many: “The modern drama should reflect some part of the great Futurist dream that rises from our daily lives, stimulated by terrestrial, marine, and aerial velocities, dominated by steam and electricity” (Pleasure… Flint 114).
42 The script retains the original founders’ names, with the convention that “Where Shakespearean characters appear [. . .], the character name is preceded by the actor’s initial: e.g. A/JULIET means Adam is playing Juliet” (xxviii).
and absurd pie” as in the apocryphal notes by Shakespeare/Borgesom (xxv), or if the greatest English dramatist has indeed been rendered more suitable and entertaining for contemporary audiences in our fast-paced world. The RSC astutely included an appendix with contrasting opinions by critics around the globe and let them battle among themselves, but favored “the assessment of the Montreal Gazette, which cautiously posits that the show is ‘Much more intelligent than it appears to be at first...’” (134).

The beginning number of the show is a reduced version of Romeo and Juliet in which the actors pretend to be victims of circumstances outside their control. The necessity of adapting the play to just three actors automatically renders the scenes more essentially succinct, and the awareness of the reduction can be introduced lightly: “And so much for Scenes One and Two” (14). The following step, this time a more decisive cut, is attributed to an actor’s loss of memory:

(Jess flips frantically through pages of the book. Daniel is concerned.)

Daniel: Now what do we do?  
Jess: I don’t know. He skipped all this stuff. (pointing to a place in the book) Go to here. (20)

This mini-play also serves as a reminder of the show’s mechanisms: “D/Nurse: Men are all dissemblers, they take things apart and reassemble them” (21).

The next adaptation, Titus Andronicus, transforms the tragedy into a gruesome cooking show. Here, “Titus Androgynous” is preparing a pie with the meat of the rapist of his daughter, whose tongue has been cut. Far from despairing, the father’s attitude is quite lighthearted, similar to what we have seen in Rognoni’s Amleto:

J/Titus: And how are we feeling today?  
A/Lavinia: Ot so ood, mubba. I ot my ongue tsopped off.  
J/Titus: I know. It’s a pisser, isn’t it? But we’ll get our revenge, won’t we? (29)

Lavinia’s “tongueless speech” (27 n.47) becomes a representation of the effects, at the same time cruel and comic, of the RSC’s abridgement, which certainly disgregates all residual veneration for the original; the pie, in turn, could serve as an image of the way Shakespearian fragments have been combined here. The play ends quickly when the finished dish is offered to a couple in the audience, accompanied by a series of puns on the body parts therein contained (“ladyfingers for dessert”; “finger-lickin’ good” 30). Then, on the verge of skipping Othello altogether (how could any of them portray a black man?), the troupe finds a solution: a version put to rap music that ends “in a
black power salute‖ (36). Although acknowledged as not particularly original, the number is "one of the most consistently crowd-pleasing sections of the show‖ (33 n.55), perhaps owing to a good degree of self-parody, but possibly also because it gives the audience time to adapt by maintaining a certain textual length.

Much more daring is the company’s further step, a unique combination of all of Shakespeare’s comedies, which they justify with the claim that “Shakespeare was a formula writer” (37). Therefore they ask the playwright:

ALL: Why did you write sixteen comedies when you could have written just one?
JESS: In answer to this question, we have taken the liberty of condensing all sixteen of Shakespeare’s comedies into a single play, which we have entitled ‘The Comedy of Two Well-Measured Gentlemen Lost in the Merry Wives of Venice on a Midsummer’s Twelfth Night in Winter.’
ADAM: Or ...
DANIEL: ‘Cymbeline Taming Pericles the Merchant in the Tempest of Love As Much As You Like It For Nothing.’
ADAM: Or ...
ALL: ‘The Love Boat Goes to Verona.’ (37–38)

The entire section that contains this dialogue is an ingenious synthesis of the two complementary archetypes of brevity and length. First, the RSC combines parts of several titles into a longer title; then, the result is reduced to its essence; finally, the section goes on to propose a rather convoluted summary in five brief acts, but covers the entire matter, so to speak, of all the comedies. For synthesis, this is an exceptional achievement.

Naturally, the tragedies offer more material to anyone trying to ridicule the grandiloquence and wordiness of the plays, especially since they are not already funny. Therefore, the RSC embarks on an exaggeratedly Scottish version of Macbeth (“J/MACBETH: Stay, ye imperrfect mcspeaker. Mactell me macmore” 44); a Julius Caesar quickly transitioning into Antony and Cleopatra due to a character’s ego (“J/ANTONY: Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears. I come to bury Caesar, so bury him, and let’s get on to my play, ‘Antony...’ 47); an improvised version of Troilus and Cressida that is soon interrupted because it is too boring once approached from a hyper-intellectual viewpoint; and a condensation of all the historical plays into a football match.

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43 The last line becomes “Four Weddings and a Transvestite” in the later DVD version, a sign of the troupe’s constant spirit of improvisation and adaptation to specific circumstances.
since “sports are visceral, they’re exciting to watch” (53). The latter is another masterpiece of synthesis, in which the announcer so describes the final moment:

DANIEL (announcer): FUM-BLE!!! And Henry the Eighth comes up with it. He’s at the twenty, the fifteen, the ten... He stops at the five to chop off his wife’s head... TOUCHDOWN for the Red Rose! Oh, my! You gotta believe this is the beginning of a Tudor Dynasty! (55)

Indeed, one might look back at one of the hues of the meraviglioso futurista to find the exact antecedent: “a cumulus of events unfolded at great speed, of stage characters pushed from right to left in two minutes (‘and now let’s have a look at the Balkans’: King Nicholas, Enver-Bey, Daneff, Venizelos, belly-blows and fistfights between Serbs and Bulgars, a couplet, and everything vanishes)” (Variety Flint 117).

To critics who may regret what was lost in the reduction, the RSC would unashamedly reply: “We have expunged much of Shakespeare’s subtle psychological insight, his carefully spun subplots, his well-honed social satire, and skipped right to the sex and killing” (xviii). And The Variety Theatre supported basically the same attitude:

The conventional theater exalts the inner life, professorial meditation, libraries, museums, monotonous crises of conscience, stupid analyses of feelings, in other words (dirty thing and dirty word), psychology, whereas, on the other hand, the Variety Theater exalts action, heroism, life in the open air, dexterity, the authority of instinct and intuition. To psychology it opposes what I call “body-madness” (Flint 120).

Thus, after rapidly mentioning Timon of Athens – where the mention is the abbreviation – and discarding Coriolanus completely due to a potential bad pun (“Okay, so we skip the anus play” 57), only Hamlet remains after the intermission, apparently the most targeted play of the Shakespearean corpus.45

44 In a later manifesto, Theatre of Surprise (Il teatro della sorpresa 1921), an evolution of the Synthetic Theatre, Marinetti intended to “[s]uggest a continuity of other very comical ideas [. . . thereby] training the Italian spirit to maximum elasticity with all its extra- logical spiritual gymnastics” (Marinetti 168). The manifesto included gymnasts and athletes among the expressions of body-madness.

45 Abele observed that “of Shakespeare’s texts, Hamlet is the most frequently quoted, appropriated, rewritten and produced in popular culture. Though popularized Hamlets appear globally, this affinity seems especially strong in American popular culture” (8). On the other side of the Atlantic, an account of short plays inspired by Shakespeare in the amateur British stage was given by Kosok: “Hamlet, because it is so well known, lends itself more than the others to a special kind of burlesque: the reduction of a complex play
Here, the RSC makes one step backward – an entire play lasting about twenty minutes of the show – and several steps forward, exploiting more variations on the theme of abbreviation. The pressure of the “to be or not to be” monologue is relieved by abandoning it halfway (“you just can’t take the pressure of this speech!!!” 79), whereas another speech (“I have of late […] lost all my mirth”) is instead thoroughly performed in a serious fashion and dismissed only at the end (“So, we’ll skip that speech” 81). This technique not only allows a demonstration of how the performer can go beyond mockery and act it in the traditional serious way, but also experiments on the degree zero of abridgement.

More complex is the “get thee to a nunnery” scene, the culmination of the RSC’s consistent attempt to interact with the audience throughout the show. In order to elicit a credible emotional response from the “volunteer” spectator chosen to play Ophelia, the audience is divided into three Freudian parts – her Id, Ego, and Superego – that are gradually trained to collaborate through simple movements or slogans. However emotional the result, “all that Ophelia does in response is, she screams. That’s all she does” (83). In reviewing this point during an Off-Broadway production in 2001, D.J.R. Bruckner reports a reaction that closely resembles the following gained by the Futurists over time in the transition from the serate to the Synthetic Theatre: “The enthusiasm of the crowd I was part of makes me suspect that this play has developed a cult; the actors didn’t really have to coach the audience in its lines.”

At the end, what remains for the actors is to fulfill the claim that they “know ‘Hamlet’ backwards and forwards” (66). Hence, they set out to surpass Stoppard with three acrobatic encores: the first one reviews highlights of the play, the second runs almost impossibly faster, and the third goes backwards and reverses actions (from end to beginning), word order (“Nunnery a to thee get”), and letter sequence (“Sesir gnik eht” 108). The idea reminds us of yet another Futurist proposal: “play a Beethoven symphony backward, beginning with the last note” to a few minutes’ running-time, with an exaggerated emphasis on the banalities of the plot” (168).

46 Of course, this also has a counterpart in a Futurist manifesto: “Introduce surprise and the need to move among the spectators of the orchestra, boxes, and balcony” (Variety Flint 121), or “ELIMINATE THE PRECONCEPTION OF THE FOOTLIGHTS BY THROWING NETS OF SENSATION BETWEEN STAGE AND AUDIENCE; THE STAGE ACTION WILL INVADE THE ORCHESTRA SEATS, THE AUDIENCE” (Synthetic Flint 128). The RSC’s explicit reference is to more recent concepts: “ADAM: I think we should WORKSHOP this. I think we could really make this a happening moment” (84). Yet, without the Futurist notion of a conflictual relationship with the spectators, critics cannot comprehend moments of the show, such as “the recurrent (so to speak) gag in which each of Adam Long’s ditzy heroines mimes losing her lunch in the lap of an audience member” (Peterson 24).

47 The Futurists exalted variety theatre for its emphasis on interaction: “The Variety Theater is alone in seeking the audience’s collaboration. It doesn’t remain static like a stupid voyeur, but joins noisily in the action, in the singing, accompanying the orchestra, communicating with the actors in surprising actions and bizarre dialogues” (Flint 118).
Variety, Flint 121). Overall, noted Jean Peterson, “[t]he actors change character, scene, gender, century, and stylistic approach with lightning speed [. . .] with an energetic fervor so manic that all six performing feet rarely touched the ground at the same time” (24–25). This is, indeed, Futurist body-madness.

Still, beyond the velocity attainable at the textual level, there are at least two more aspects, those of costumes and props, that can reveal a connection with the Futurists and theatrical synthesis. The first appearance of Jess, “in Shakespearean attire and Converse high-top canvas sneakers” (7) produces the same effect as in Corra and Settimelli’s Dissonance (Dissonanza), a sintesi in which a man in modern clothes asks for a match halfway through a fourteenth-century scene in verse between a lady and a page (Marinetti et al., 39–41). Furthermore, when “DANIEL wears goggles; ADAM wears floppy bug antennae and a clown nose; JESS wears a pair of Groucho Marx-funny-nose-and-glasses” (38), the RSC literally embodies the Futurists’ proposal to “[i]n every way encourage the type of the [clowns and of the] eccentric American” (Flint 121). In addition, Reed Martin’s training as clown becomes useful as entertainment during the intermission.²⁸

Finally, the speedy costume changes required by the Bardian condensation is clearly the “synthesis of speed + transformations” (Variety, Flint 119) admired by the Futurists in stage transformist Leopoldo Fregoli. Here, it cooperates to produce some comic problems for the RSC: “(ADAM enters. He is ostensibly CLAUDIUS, but is not quite totally dressed in three different costumes.) [. . .] J/HAMLET: [. . .] uncle... father... mother... whatever you are” (100–01). A piece of costume and a prop is the sweat sock used as the Ghost (68), but the show is filled with more “objects that act,” such as an inflatable dinosaur and a small battery-operated Godzilla, an actual machine acting on stage for Troilus and Cressida.²⁹ Moreover, apart from the traditional puppets already present in Stoppard for the play-within-the-play scene, the RSC actors repeatedly use a stunt dummy, for example as the corpse of Ophelia. All these props could be seen as embodiments of degrees of Futurist dehumanization of traditional

²⁸ See also Boccioni who proclaimed: “We extol clowns, acrobats and all the grotesque and unexpected of circuses and fairs” (38).

²⁹ This sequence spurred the only critical reference I could find to anything beyond Shakespearean parody. Bernard Levin in the London Times in 1992 said: “To analyze humor is even worse than trying to define it, but I must try. These three men have tapped a wonderful spring; I think it is the element of inconsequentiality that separates them from ordinary funny-men. Let me give you an example: at one point, with no relevance at all to the structure (if it has one) of the show, a little clockwork Godzilla wanders out from the wings and lurches downstage, while the three seem helpless to do anything about it or even understand what is happening. Surrealism is an overworked term, but these three earn it. Their surrealism, though, is shaped into laughter” (qtd. in Singer).
characters, with implications for the role of human performers in the crunch of the synthetic mechanism.50

Thus, in terms of Shakespearean abridgement, the two groups are complementary. The Futurists defined the Synthetic Theatre and proposed a reduction of Shakespeare’s dramaturgy to one act, even though they did not fully explore the possibility in concrete terms. In turn, the RSC started with Hamlet and then, because of the need to expand the show, actually fulfilled the Futurist project. Neither group limited themselves to the “happy few” and decidedly went in the direction of the audience against pomp and boredom.51 Yet, where the Futurists were limited by their difficulties in finding suitable actors and performance spaces, the RSC gradually transformed Shakespearean condensation into a mainstream experience.

If the RSC had stopped at Shakespeare, we could rest content in placing them solely within the long tradition of Shakespop parody. But there is more. Once Austin Tichenor – a later addition to the troupe – began to work on the company’s second show, The Complete History of America (abridged) (1993), the RSC found its path and has since thrived, abridging practically everything and producing five more titles so far: The Bible: The Complete Word of God (abridged); Western Civilization: The Complete Musical (abridged); All the Great Books (abridged); Completely Hollywood (abridged); and The Complete World of Sports (abridged).

Therefore, it seems productive to highlight, within the RSC’s DNA, the specific strand of synthetism that was first clearly “identified” by the Futurists. One could say that through the Reduced Shakespeare Company, the Futurist Synthetic Theatre has successfully been resurrected.

50 Plassard notes the Futurists’ “fury at systematically exploring every possibility of modifying the relations between man and the stage, from the performer’s transformation into pure mechanism to the substitution with the animated object” (37).
51 “Pressed for a statement of artistic philosophy, Martin posits: ‘To put the ‘shake’ back in Shakespeare.’ ‘We’re returning Shakespeare to the groundlings’ […] ‘We don’t make fun of Shakespeare,’ adds Martin, ‘we make fun of the pompous, overblown productions of Shakespeare that sort of make people sick of him. We try to make him fun and accessible.’ Borgeson comments: ‘When people have ‘Shakespeare fear,’ it has nothing to do with the quality of the plays, but with the middleman—whether it’s a teacher or a theatre company.” (Londré 56)
Works cited

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