

Art in Illyria—A Workshop at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, June 15 2017

Report by Diana Little

One of several collaborations between the Early Modern Conversions Project and the Stratford Festival, “Art in Illyria” brought together twenty-eight participants from Canada and the United States for a morning of imaginative exploration. Before attending the Stratford Festival’s production of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, the participants had the opportunity to work with the Stratford artists that make productions such as *Twelfth Night* so entertaining and compelling.

The Stratford Festival has been a close and enthusiastic partner of the Conversions Project since 2013. The Conversions Project and Stratford Festival have organized several Forum workshops, such as “Art in Arden,” which brought participants inside Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, as well as a dramatic workshop at Ryerson University on Middleton and Rowley’s play *The Changeling*. For a full list of past workshops, see the list below.

Present at this workshop was Conversions Director Paul Yachnin, outgoing Conversions Project Manager Stephen Wittek, incoming Project Manager Marie-Claude Felton, and McGill English undergraduate and Conversions UGSA Diana Little (the author of this report). The participants also had the pleasure of working with composer Paul Shilton, actor and dancer Rachel Crowther, and visual artist Vanessa de Groot. Stratford Interim Director of Education Edward Duranyi made the workshop possible by taking part in the planning and by providing excellent and timely support to the artists and the participants. As with previous collaborations between the Conversions Project and the Stratford Festival, the facilitators of “Art in Illyria” sought to lead patrons of the Festival through an in-depth exploration of Shakespeare’s art.

The workshop was led by Paul Yachnin, who began by introducing everyone to Viola, a young woman forced to masquerade as a man after a horrible shipwreck separates her from her home and her brother. Emphasizing Viola’s fear, frustration, and confusion as she navigates through love triangles and a new identity, Yachnin laid out the participants’ task: to recreate and convey Viola’s story through a specific artistic medium. With the assistance of the Stratford artists Paul, Rachel, and Vanessa, the participants tackled one of three art forms: music, dance/theatre, or painting.

The new musicians began by addressing the problem of theme— what stands out as the dominant theme in a play that is about change, be it change in gender, love, or identity? Focusing on the strangeness and alienation Viola feels towards her new setting, they questioned how to express this through a combination of music and lyrics. The new visual artists similarly attempted to capture Viola’s confusion, but began with words rather than images; first asked to select words and phrases that resonated with Viola’s story, the participants then composed a poem or letter using the words they had chosen. Finally, Vanessa asked them to convert these words into paintings that would

address or capture an aspect of Viola's self or transformation. The dance and theatre workshop introduced a different obstacle: how can we convey Viola's conversion through movement and use of space? What followed was an impressive collaborative effort— fabrics were used to convey the chaos of the storm while the participants used dance and movement to represent the complex character interactions and love triangles in the play.

After a short lunch break, the participants gathered to see the final products. Though each workshop required the participants to use different tools— paint, instruments, or movement— the performances and presentations were able to enter into dialogue with one another. Wanting to pinpoint Viola's inner turmoil, the musicians wrote a brand new song that left the audience with the question, "I am Viola, but who is she?" The amateur visual artists likewise visualized this turmoil, often combining heavy blacks with vibrant colours to represent the love, pain, and confusion Viola experiences simultaneously throughout the play. The dance/theatre workshop staged a short three-act play that summarized Viola's progression, beginning with Viola's conversion into a man and ending with the word "freedom" as Viola converts back to a woman. After each of the presentations, the participants were invited to share their thoughts and analyze the specific techniques and approaches of each art form.

What became clear with each performance, however, was how *Twelfth Night* lacks a definitive resolution. The painters illustrated that there are endless ways to visually represent turmoil, as each artist produced a distinct painting that captured his or her individual interpretation of the play. Those in the dance/theatre workshop likewise debated whether the play's resolution is really a resolution; does Viola return to her true self or is she forced back into constrictive gender roles and expectations? The musicians' song ended on a question rather than an answer, asking "Can I be free?" Overall, the performances captured the complexities that go into art-making and production, which are always subject to interpretation.

At the end of the morning's work, many of the participants remarked on how the workshop had helped them understand Viola's character and appreciate the breadth of conflict in what might appear as a light-hearted comedy. They also commented on how useful such workshops would be for high school students, who often have trouble navigating Shakespeare's complex narratives and speech. Workshops such as this allow one to interact deeply with characters' psyches and motivations, which can make reading Shakespeare easier and more enjoyable. Before the workshop closed, one participant noted the Stratford Festival's motto, "Drama is living thought," and aptly touched on the fact that intellectual and emotional engagement with art is key to not only understanding it, but appreciating it and ensuring its longevity.

Past collaborations between the Conversions Project and the Stratford Festival:

26 June, 2016,
Stratford, Ontario

Stratford Shakespeare Festival
Forum Workshop: 'Art in Arden'.

23 June, 2016

Stratford, Ontario

Stratford Shakespeare Festival

Free Forum: 'The Sublime Power of Conversion' with Paul Yachnin.

4 June 2015

Stratford, Ontario

Stratford Shakespeare Festival

"Changing Kate," with Patricia Badir, Deborah Hay, and Paul Yachnin

12 June 2015

Stratford, Ontario

"Heavenly Music"

Stratford Shakespeare Festival

Paul D. Fleck Marquee, Festival Theatre

17 August 2014

Stratford, Ontario

"Souls Under Pressure," with Colm Feore, Torrance Kirby, and Paul Yachnin

The Stratford Festival Forum