

**Digital Asian Shakespeare Festival, 11th World Shakespeare Congress,
Singapore, 18-24 July 2021**

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Digital Asian Shakespeare Festival, 11th World Shakespeare Congress, Singapore: World Circuits, 18-24 July 2021.

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The Digital Asian Shakespeare Festival nested within the World Shakespeare Congress, 'where communities of Shakespeare scholars, teachers and practitioners in over 40 countries' gathered online (Yong Li Lan and Bi-qi Beatrice Lee, Co-chairs of the Local Organising Committee, conference programme). Lee Hyon-u, the Festival Director, arranged an astonishing array of Asian performances. Lee wrote of the festival as offering 'rare opportunities for delegates to enjoy the diversity and depth of Asian Shakespeare while breaking through the barrier of the Covid pandemic' (conference programme). It certainly broke the theatre drought I had been experiencing after bingeing webcast NT Live (UK) and Schaubühner (Germany) productions in 2020.

The performance videos on offer, forming the backbone of the event, were as follows: *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (2019, dir. Tang Shu-Wing, Hong Kong)*; *The Tempest* (2004, dir. Wu[??] Hsing-kuo and Tsui Hark, Taiwan and Hong Kong)*; *Pericles* (2016, dir. Yang Jung-Un); *Ophelia* (2016, dir. Natalie Henedige, Singapore); *Miyagixx Noh Othello* (2018, dir. Miyagi Satoshi, Japan)*; *Mak Yong Titis Sakti* (2009, dir. Norzizi Zulkfli, Malaysia); *Lear is Dead* (2018, dir. Nelson Chia, Singapore); *Kathakali King Lear* (2019, dir. Annette Leday and David McRuvie, France and Australia)*; and *Henry V* (2019, dir. Owen Horsley, UK with Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre, China)*. Aptly, given its origins and popularity in and beyond East Asia, a short anime of *As You Like It* was also available (2020, dir. Hannes Rall, Singapore)*. I had seen *Pericles* in Seoul in 2016, but those productions marked with an asterisk represent those I watched online, along with their associated in-conversations, watch parties, and keynotes, where these were available for catch-up. Additionally, there was a digital, time-travelling tour of Shakespeare in Singapore; in-conversations between directors and academics, with live Q&As in which delegates could participate; and watch parties. These had some overlap with the in-conversations. However, distinctly, they saw directors talk viewers through hand-picked scenes from their featured production, again concluding with Q&A opportunities for delegates.

Lee's experience of putting together a set of performances in similar circumstances for digital viewing as part of the Asian Shakespeare Association conference – in Seoul and globally online, in November 2020 – contributed to the super-slick delivery of the Festival. The Festival's contents were available for consumption and participation in various permutations – synchronous, asynchronous and both – though I consumed them mainly asynchronously as evening entertainment in the UK. The seamless feel of the non-performance Festival events was achieved, in large part, in the moment of broadcast (and recording) by invisible assistants 'behind-the-scenes', operating the video clips. This importantly freed up the guest speakers, and their hosts, from the technological and strength-of-nerve challenges involved in multi-media presentations. Additionally, translators, guest speakers and hosts worked apparently effortlessly together at events, giving the impression that their ensemble efforts had been as well directed and rehearsed as the productions of which they spoke. I particularly enjoyed the interlocution (as the programme terms it) of Lee and Ko Yu Jin with Yang Jung-Un, Emily Soon with Annette

Leday, and Mika Eglinton, supported by Jessica Chiba, with Miyagi Satoshi. In terms of accessibility, close captioning and subtitles were available throughout, though I only experience using those in English.

Lee wrote in the conference programme that ‘the performances will *encompass a wide range* of representative Asian Shakespeare works from the traditional to the innovative’ (Lee, my emphasis). It is the expansiveness of the range of productions included that I want to foreground in this essay, illustrating it with examples from the Festival items with which I engaged. Listing the productions above has already demonstrated the range of countries the productions were drawn from, largely within the East Asian region but also South Asia and in one example, instigated by the Britain’s Royal Shakespeare Company (*Henry V*). All works dated from the turn of this millennium onwards – something necessitated by changes in the technologies and purposes of recording theatre. The disparity between the quality of recordings made in the ‘noughties’ and the last couple of years was very noticeably different. As someone who has only rarely watched archive footage of theatre productions filmed from a single fixed camera, and who has seen much more by way of filmed productions explicitly designed for cinema relay, I lasted only a couple of minutes in front of my initial choice, the roughly dozen-years old *Mak Yong Titis Sakti*, before switching to *The Tragedy of Macbeth* filmed just before the pandemic. Additionally, the catalogue of Festival productions also demonstrates their range through Shakespearean to new writing; mix of female and male directors; genres – comedy, history, late romance, tragedy; and art forms: animated film, dance (from *kathakali* to aboriginal Taiwanese), opera (*jingju* and *kunqu*), ancient and contemporary drama. Languages and dialects, spoken and sung, included Cantonese, modern and Shakespearean English, Kelantan (used in parts of Malaysia and Thailand), Korean, Japanese, Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese), and a blend of Malayalam and Sanskrit. It is safe to say that Lee’s promise of range was fulfilled in multiple respects.

What I want to focus on in the second half of this essay is the range of theoretical concepts related to Asian Shakespeare that the programme managed to encompass and to which it spoke. The terminology used to describe these is contested, and cannot be resolved in this essay, so I have opted to use multiple terms in clusters intended to indicate related (but not monolithic) positions. The Festival’s Asian Shakespeare that might additionally be described using terms such as monocultural, national, regional, local, folkloric or particularist includes the *Kathakali King Lear*, *Miyagi Noh Othello*, and *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. Lee’s suggestion that the chosen productions represent ‘windows into Asian aesthetics...rooted in Asian religious rituals, traditional culture, and philosophy’ perhaps best applies to these shows (conference programme).

It might seem odd to include the *Kathakali King Lear* in this group, since it was developed by an Australian dramaturg and a French dancer-choreographer, trained in Kerala, in this ancient Indian form where dancers move to, and almost sign with hand gestures (*mudras*) a text sung by musicians. Their expressions and movements are underscored by the percussionists. Leday and McRuvie worked with masters of *kathakali* to develop the original production in 1989, with the express aim of using a familiar story to introduce this unfamiliar, ‘larger than life’ form to a western audience (watch party and in-conversation). They also suggest that key qualities of Shakespeare’s story, a father contemplating how to divide his wealth between three daughters and its discussions of filial love and duty, has

resonance within an Indian cultural context, while his works are familiar to Indians as a legacy of British colonialism. The production adds a new story to the *kathakali* repertoire, as well as some formal innovations including the introduction of a silence, unknown in *kathakali*, around Cordelia's refusal to answer her father's request to prove her love to him; a 'full percussion moment', without the singers or dancers, in the storm scene; and the *vidushaka*, a character type from a yet more ancient Sanskrit theatre form, through which to represent Lear's Fool. Additionally, the show has international economies of production and consumption: for example, Indian and French government funding along its life-course and invitations to international arts festivals. These elements help to explain its reputation as a point of 'reference in the field of intercultural performance' (conference programme).

However, I suggest that it is a key example from this Festival of regional, local, folkloric and particularist Shakespeare. It uses literary rules, languages, music, the traditionally bare stage, spare use of props, and codifications of dress, make-up, expression, gesture and movement from *kathakali*, attributed to southwestern India, where it developed as an entertainment held in the rice fields beyond the temples, based on myths and epics. The 2019 reworking of the production, shown at this festival, arguably makes it less culturally hybrid, since the previously contentious practice (at least for conservative exponents of *kathakali*) of Leday performing the role of Cordelia, in a single-sex, traditionally male-only, art form has reverted to the norm of a young male dancing the role. This version has proven more popular in India, Leday revealed in conversation at the Festival, than the original. Whether that is because it better conforms to tradition, because traditionalist views have changed – possibly in order to ensure the form survives declining interest from younger generations, because this version is substantially shorter – better reflecting the rhythms of modern life (time-poor audiences), or because, after decades of touring the world, it has garnered an appealing critical acclaim was not apparent.

Miyagi Noh Othello and *The Tragedy of Macbeth* differ from this *King Lear* in their primary audiences for their Shakespeare productions being in Japan and Hong Kong (perhaps also greater China) respectively. Yet they are regional, local, folkloric and particularist in their use of Japanese and Cantonese translations, local creators and practitioners, costume and sets. Like Leday on *kathakali*, Miyagi spoke at the Festival of innovating within the tradition of *mugen-noh*. *Noh* is an ancient Japanese form combining poetic but monotonous song with dance characterised by slow movement. *Mugen* indicates that it is centered on a dream plot. Miyagi uses it to tell the story of *Othello* from the perspective of Desdemona, in spite of the convention excluding 'passive' characters from being *noh* protagonists (watch party). He also breaks with traditionalism by casting women performers in a form dominantly performed only by men, including here a female actor playing a male monk with a pencilled-on moustache. His further innovations include choosing a story nominally set outside Japan; using an 'unorthodox' stage and blocking; experimenting with playing one role using separate actors to deliver the speech and movement respectively (conference programme); and using masks portraying, not character types as in traditional *noh* theatre but, characters from the Japanese syllabary spelling out I-Ro-Ha-Ni-Ho. These are the first letters of the Japanese alphabet that begin an ancient Japanese poem about the transience of life (Jessica Chiba, private conversation).

Miyagi Noh Othello is monocultural or national in its use of Japanese language (excepting some playful Italian by the 'Venetian' women in Cyprus), including lines from the play painted onto the players' *kimonos* and *yukatas* using the Japanese alphabets; cast and creatives; *jutai* chorus and percussionists. Religious beliefs around the need for a supporting character's listening intervention to help the protagonist spirit let go of their worldly attachments (both positive and negative) and reach *nirvana*, thereby also sparing the living the damaging residue that a spirit's unresolved, strong emotion creates are rooted in Buddhism, a prevalent religion in Japan (watch party). Moreover, the production's inspiration is Japanese: an essay by translator Hirakawa Sukehiro that argues for attending to Desdemona, not Othello, as the central character, thereby solving Miyagi's frustration at Shakespeare's play-text and other productions.

Miyagi's interpretation of Othello's killing Desdemona as the point at which both realise 'how much he loved her', become 'closest to one another', can be contextualised in terms of gender inequality and persistently high rates of domestic violence in Japan (watch party). The actress playing Desdemona mimes being strangled by Othello, wearing his leather gauntlet on her arm. The expression crossing her face renders asphyxiation in a way that could be read as orgasmic. Murder as an expression of extreme love is present in traditional stories in many countries but romanticising and eroticising – rather than critiquing – such violence is increasingly unpalatable internationally (see the international spread of the #MeToo movement, for example). There was also some discussion of the Japanese language's affordances in blurring the identities of victim and perpetrator that suggested further particularity and made me yet uncomfortable, since I was understanding the discussion in relation to prevalent discourses of female complicity in domestic and sexual violence (watch party). However, Miyagi offered another take on his intentions when he hinted at his notion that Desdemona becomes the representative of the innumerable powerless, unnamed people and that the production allows those powerless people to be liberated along with Desdemona, not literally by reaching *nirvana*, but through a sense of relief at realising a commonality of experience.

A poem attributed to Soseki Natsume, inspired by his reading of Othello, projected onto the rear wall of the set points to a couple of centuries' history of cross-cultural traffic between Britain and Japan: 'Before the white chrysanthemum, the scissors hesitate a moment' (*'Shiragiku ni shibashi tamerau hasami kana'*). So too does Miyagi's choice of a double dream vision *noh*, inspired by English scholar Arthur Waley's use of *Othello* as a vehicle with which to explain the structure of *noh* to his Anglophone audiences. However, Tang is arguably more pan-Asian than Miyagi in his use of regional physical theatre traditions and nod towards Japan with his use of black-clad stagehands (*kuroko*), including as *ninja*-like figures for the unnamed soldiers but deployed especially well in the dagger scene, seducing Macbeth towards it with a display elegant, athletic swordsmanship. He uses music eclectically, not just the sounds of Asian percussion, but also the Cuban band Buena Vista Social Club's 'Chan chan', its Spanish lyrics depicting a man's feeling undone by the strength of his physical attraction to his female companion. His premise, of a modern-day man and woman dreaming themselves into the Macbeths' ancient story, only to awaken to their future roles in contemporary turbulence (conference programme), plays more explicitly with connecting diverse times and spaces – national, gender and textual boundaries than the previous two productions I have discussed. *Hamlet*'s most famous lines make a surprise

entry, as does a brief history of the gunpowder plot in lieu of the Porter scene. In terms of contemporary political resonances in greater China, Tang spoke only of how images of the umbrella protests saturated his consciousness at the time. An example is the use of a paper parasol to shade Duncan's party, and its torn reappearance after his death, connoting the everyday tools of resistance seen on Hong Kong streets and their battery. Insider researchers may perhaps notice further local, particular allusions. This was the most visually impressive Festival production I watched – concentrated on a relatively small, square stage in front of curtains painted as a Chinese mountain landscape (but also alluding to Shakespeare's Scottish setting) and using of rich, moody colours and lighting – red, blue and black in particular.

Although my viewing choices were dominated by Asian Shakespeare that is local, particular and so on, there were also examples that might be described using terms such as cosmopolitan (used repeatedly as a loan word by Lee and Yang in their Korean conversation), global, multicultural, pluralist or pan-Asian beyond Tang. Yang spoke of his desert dunes set for *Pericles* as bringing the sands of the middle East to Asia, filtered through the theatrical vision of one Asian man, since he has travelled extensively in Egypt and was awed by the landscapes he saw. Arabic greetings expand this imagined community from the visual to the auditory. He also transports the Mediterranean onto set with a toppled, larger-than-life statue of the goddess Diana. The name of Yang's company *Yohangza* means 'voyager' or 'traveller'. It not only encapsulates the letters of his name and describes his own life experiences but also captures the hard-wiring of 'transnational', 'transcultural' and 'intercultural exchange' into his work (watch party). He spoke of historic through-lines connecting Shakespeare, Brecht, and himself, as well as the influence of Stanislavskian actor training and Shakespeare's Globe's performer-audience 'communication' on his productions (watch party, in conversation). Yet the production also contains particularly Korean resonances, such as the relationship between the play's themes of forgiveness and reconciliation and the *han* experienced by Korean people. It is a term without a direct translation in English, but that might be described as a sense of suffering ('visceral, emotional and spiritual') or intergenerational trauma caused by modern wars, fatal disasters, the family separations and bereavements (in conversation). Notwithstanding, Yang's relation of this very Korean experience across borders – to another country rent by civil war and interference on both sides from foreign allies – was demonstrated by his commenting that news coverage of Syria was on his mind as he developed the production.

Another Festival item that could be described as an Asian Shakespeare characterised by further adjectives – such as multicultural, pluralist, pan-Asian etc. – is the *As You Like It*. Aesthetically, it combines angular, intricate, South-East Asian figures inspired by shadow puppetry with fluffy, cartoon sheep that look like they have strayed out of a BBC children's programme. Touchstone and Audrey are depicted as monkeys, which should appeal to children and all who joy in childness. Arden is a tropical forest, replete with dragonfruit and a tigress decidedly less incongruous than the lioness Shakespeare has prowling among his oaks. Hymen is not a classical god, but a mandala-dwelling fairy. Bells and gongs literally resound in the score. The twenty-minute film is entirely spoken in English (except for one line whispered by Celia to Rosalind). The actors speak in Received Pronunciation accents that leave the drawing of costumes and deportment to represent the differences between court and country characters. In terms of its production, Hannes Rall (Nanyang

Technological University) joined forces with Michael Dobson, (Shakespeare Institute) as academic consultant along with Stephen Lansing, an expert in Bali, Borneo and the Malay Archipelago, as an anthropological consultant. The voice-actors credited appear to be drawn from across East and South-East Asia. In the tradition of the BBC *Animated Shakespeare* series, this film could have appeal in classrooms the world-over where Shakespeare is being taught – although a national survey of teaching Shakespeare in the UK conducted by Velda Elliott and me suggested that *As You Like It* is not a play commonly taught at school, where it is taught it is usually done with students beginning high school, fitting the film's assumed intended age-group. The language and possible educational application of this film could foreseeably invite postcolonial critiques, as does the *Henry V* production included in the Festival.

Henry V was performed by Mandarin-speaking actors from Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre, with the British director Owen Horsley, as part of the Royal Shakespeare Company's project to translate the Complete Works into Chinese. The idea of creating a translation that you immediately test out in performance is very appealing as praxis and potential to impact future approaches to translation – although I was not clear from the watch party whether this experience of staging the play had ultimately led to changes in the published translation. As a viewer, I appreciated the sharing of the Chorus between the actors, the fit between the retained French lines and the physical proximity to the city's French concession (though the latter's political history went unexplored), the gender-blind casting of this young and compelling ensemble, and the illuminated cube conveying Henry's isolation at the heart of the set. Horsley's injunction to theatre audiences to use their imagination echoed similar statements from Tang to Leday. While the production was billed as moving the action to 'contemporary China', I could see little evidence of that (conference programme). There were possible, oblique references to high-rise glass towers and famed fashion boutiques in the neutral, modern set and costumes. These echoed the rust-red towers and blue versus red, France versus England, colour scheme of Michael Boyd's Histories cycle more than modern Shanghai and indeed Horsley had previously worked on the second tetralogy with Greg Doran. Hence, this Festival production triggered neo-imperialist alarm bells that I could not shut off, even though Horsley's participation in the watch party was likeable, nuanced, and contained insights on translating rhythm and thought-patterns between languages and cultures.

Here is what else rankled with me, rather than a definitive postcolonialist critique of the production. Firstly, the choice of play which, depending on who you ask, is English patriotic propaganda (a form in which the Chinese Communist Party hardly needs lessons), an opportunity for people to learn about British history (though English people tend to learn very little about Chinese history), or a universal musing on love and war, offering a connection at a 'human, rather than historical, level' (watch party). Horsley explained that the company workshopped for two weeks to see if it was the right project to do, he himself initially having qualms as to whether it would get an 'immediate reaction from actors and audience' being 'confusing to the best of us' i.e. even 'English audiences'. *Henry V* is a play that contains musings on, and parodies of, multilingualism and linguistic difference. The cast apparently had huge fun playing up to regional rivalries between China – to replace those between the not-so United Kingdoms – generating enthusiastic appreciation from the local

audience. However, it would have been still more fascinating to explore the considerations, beyond the literary and artistic, at play in the decision.

Global Shakespeare scholars have demonstrated that Shakespeare can be used to critique authoritarian political regimes at a safe remove. This would be a bold and, for opponents of the current Chinese government, admirable reason for staging *Henry V* in China. If it was a factor in their choice, however, the Royal Shakespeare Company are tight-lipped. The closest Horsley came to addressing the play's politics was to say that 'Shakespeare wasn't able to write a political piece of drama, or he got shunted into saying particular things. He's very ambivalent in what he says about leadership in the play. He poses questions but doesn't answer them'. Horsley arguably creates Shakespeare in the RSC's own mould in this instance. This commentary was given in answer to Dobson's attempts to probe him on whether they played a particular political message. The latter's attempts to press Horsley further were impressive, especially when he asked 'Did the cast discuss nationalism? What might strike a chord with a country occupying another country? Smashing a foreigner's head against a steel barrier?' (watch party).

Secondly, having the artistic leadership weighted towards the English company and funnelling the Chinese practitioners' contribution mainly towards their 'voices' and 'bodies' unhelpfully reinforced traditional hegemonic roles, west-east. It sits uncomfortably with Horsley's recalled declaration that 'I am not coming here to tell you how to do it, I am coming here to do it with you' and that this constituted a form of 'liberation' for the actors – implicitly contrasting with a more didactic, directorial tradition assumed to characterise Asian theatre. Such imbalances and inequalities imperil plenty of international Shakespeare collaborations, from performance to print. So, explicit and detailed, publicly-available reflection – frank consideration of the 'gains and losses' (to use a phrase from Leday) – as well as accounts of actions taken to ameliorate inequity are to be welcomed.

It was clear what Horsley thought the Chinese company had gained: experience of, and positively changed attitudes towards, ensemble working, daily physical training and warm-ups. The lead roles liked the experience of working one-on-one with a director, something to which he reports them being unused. Also, the knowledge that Shakespeare plays beyond the 'big-hitters' can be successfully produced in China, since the Chinese reviews were reportedly 'extremely favourable'. The British Royal Shakespeare Company members involved apparently gained, from China, an impression of its novelty and strangeness. There is much to be said for the benefit to individuals, from an increasingly insular England, of experiencing and enjoying these feelings. Horsley also expressed appreciation for the way in which rehearsing through an interpreter forced him to be more concise in his advice to the actors. Striving for and articulating a two-way flow of traffic between east and west should be at the heart of all such endeavours. Ultimately, what bothered me most about this production was that, having enjoyed so much Asian-led, Asian Shakespeare in this Festival, *Henry V* only convinced me further that Asian Shakespeare does not need or benefit from British, brand-name interventions. British brand-name Shakespeare, however, has much to learn from both from Asian Shakespeare generally and Digital Festivals such as this, particularly to achieve a post-pandemic and post-Brexit recovery in the UK arts sector.