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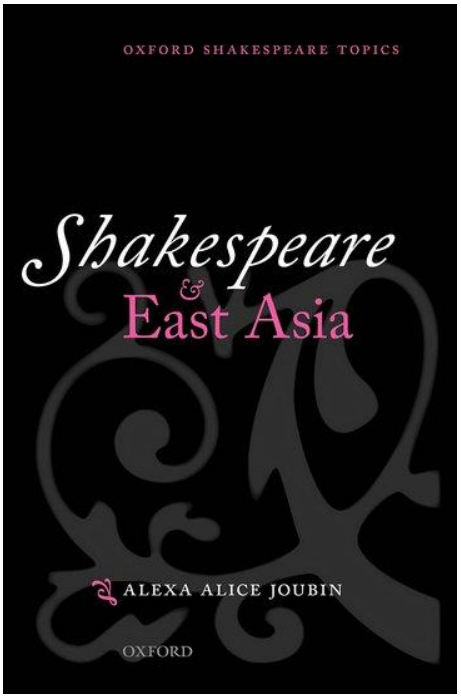
[REVIEW] "WILL IN THE WORLD: ALEXA ALICE JOUBIN'S *Shakespeare and East Asia*" BY JEFF TOMPKINS

Alexa Alice Joubin, *Shakespeare and East Asia,* Oxford University Press, 2021. 272 pp.



"What country, friends, is this?" Viola asks at the beginning of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, when her ship is wrecked on the coast of the fantastical Illyria. Alexa Alice Joubin aptly quotes Viola's line in *Shakespeare and East Asia*, a sweeping and formidably learned survey of the many ways in which artists across a vast part of the non-English-speaking world have been reimagining and repurposing Shakespeare's plays from the 1950s through the present day. It's a dense, informative, and occasionally dizzying *tour d'horizon* of modern film and theatre practice that makes "all the world's a stage" seem like a virtually literal account.

Joubin is a co-founder and co-director of the MIT Global Shakespeares Archive and a professor in several disciplines at George Washington University. In *Shakespeare and East Asia,* she attempts a careful balancing act. On one hand, she writes, "There is a degree of malleability in Shakespeare,

Greek tragedy, and other classics that allows audiences to tell their own stories and thereby to shape their knowledge base of world cultures"—suggesting that, when they're done right, something inherent in the Western classics has the power to speak to people around the world. At the same time, Joubin's *bête noire* is the network of international theatre festivals where cross-cultural Shakespeare naturally finds a home—festivals that foster "simplified notions of the universal" all too closely aligned with self-regarding Western standards of value and significance.

Elaborating on the latter issue, Joubin delivers a telling critique of the Western tendency to laud Asian Shakespeares as spectacle (the word *exoticism* becomes unavoidable in this context) at the expense of any real engagement with their dramatic and specifically linguistic content. Nearly as condescending, in her view, is the English-speaking world's habit of reducing Asian adaptations to political allegory, meaning that South Korean productions are inevitably "about" life on the divided peninsula, mainland Chinese works exist to dramatise state repression, and so on.

Shakespeare and East Asia considers artists and artworks from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. But rather than proceed via a rote country-by-country geographic approach, Joubin groups her analyses around a handful of common themes, "the cultural vibration linking productions in different cultures". As it happens, her first exploration centres on one culture, Japan, and the role of formal innovation in works by two acknowledged masters in film and theatre: Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*, his 1957 film adaptation of *Macbeth*, and Yukio Ninagawa's theatrical *Macbeth*, which premiered in Tokyo in 1980 and returned to New York City as recently as 2018, two years after Ninagawa's death. These are arguably the two best-known productions in the book, so it's shrewd of Joubin to ease readers in with them. Moving dextrously between theatre and film, she offers close readings that demonstrate how the musical and aural environments in both works heighten viewers' awareness of the unnaturalness of Macbeth's crimes.

Joubin places the two directors' achievements both within the tradition of Shakespeare performance in Japan (which dates back to 1885) and in a broader cultural context that, in the case of *Throne of Blood*, taught me some new things about an arthouse warhorse. I was fascinated to learn, for instance, that in Kurosawa's dialogue the use of gendered pronouns unique to the Japanese language reveals something about the main characters that English subtitles, no matter how idiomatic they are, simply can't convey.

One of Joubin's strongest sections focuses on "the myths of Shakespeare's remedial merit", i.e., the sentimental trope that performing his plays is somehow both good for you and good for society. That myth has animated any number of hokey "we're putting on a *show*"-type stories: Joubin cites Kenneth Branagh's movie *In the Bleak Midwinter* (known as *A Midwinter's Tale* in the US) (1995), in which an amateur dramatics troupe stages *Hamlet* in a church at Christmas. But transplanted to Asian cultures, the idea of remedial Shakespeare has more than a whiff of a colonial mindset about it, which makes it a ripe target for satire. In the Hong Kong film *One Husband Too Many* (*Yi qi liang fu*, 1988), a hapless theatre impresario meets with disaster when his ludicrous staging of *Romeo and Juliet* fails to move his audience, a modest seaside community in the New Territories: "I'm trying to bring culture to the backwater", he pleads, just before a

member of the crowd pelts him in the face with a vegetable. (In a recommended YouTube excerpt, the irreverent fun comes across even through the clutter of subtitles and a voiceover translation.)

Romeo and Juliet also takes a drubbing in another comedy, the Singaporean *Chicken Rice War* (2002), in which the deadly feud between the Capulets and the Montagues gets reworked as the rivalry between the Chans and the Wongs, two clans who run competing hawker stalls serving the titular dish. Adding a layer of reflexivity, two teenage scions of the families are acting in their high school production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Because one performer's way with the text is so much more fluent than the other's, the film dramatises the ways in which English, constantly valorised as a source of prestige and an emblem of modernity, functions as a not-so-subtle marker of class and status in multilingual Singapore.

No review of *Shakespeare and East Asia* is complete unless it alerts readers that Joubin has supplemented her book with extensive multimedia content on the MIT Global Shakespeares website. The trove of material there, a bonanza for die-hard Shakespeareans, is an opportunity to delve further into many of the works that are central to her critique. I was grateful for the clips from a piece that prompts one of her most compelling readings: *Lear Is Here*, a one-man show directed by and starring the Taiwanese actor Wu Hsing-kuo that premiered in 2001 and subsequently played in several countries. A revered exponent of the *jingju* (Beijing opera) tradition, Wu had reached a point in his career where he wanted to achieve psychologically deeper theatrical portrayals than the conventions of straight-up *jingju* would allow. In Shakespeare he found a means toward realising that depth. His *Lear*, in which he appears not only as several male and female characters from the play but also as himself, does double duty as an autobiographical inquiry and a personal take that emphasises the play's themes of transience and mortality.

Video chapters and study aids for *Lear Is Here* make it a logical point of entry to the Global Shakespeares site. Also worth sampling, for committed Shakespeareans: Singaporean director David Tse's bilingual *King Lear* (2006), which puts a poignant diaspora spin on the tragedy by making Cordelia unable to communicate with her father in his native Mandarin; and the Beijing-based director Lin Zhaohua's *Hamulaite*, a bold reimagining of *Hamlet* in which three actors play the prince at different stages of his moral development.

The cumulative impression these and some of the other productions leave is that the most successful Asian Shakespeares are the ones that are most ruthless about rearranging or remixing their source material. Exemplary hybrid works, they manage to upend "fixed notions of tradition and a narrow definition of cultural authenticity" while bolstering the case for Western stage classics as a, yes, universal wellspring of creative inspiration. At the same time, their insistence on bilingual or multilingual aural environments can be read (or heard) as pushback against what one reviewer of this book has called "the tacit anglicising effects of global culture".

Shakespeare and East Asia is unmistakably an academic study; lay readers may stumble over grim coinages like *heteroglossic* and *metalepsis*, which make it clear we've strayed outside the

Shakespearean garden. But it would be a shame if the audience for Joubin's survey were confined to PhD candidates. Ideally the range of approaches it considers would make it a touchstone for aspiring film and theatre artists of all stripes: actors, choreographers, directors, dramaturges, playwrights, and screenwriters. (I can't help thinking that some of the young people who recently emigrated from Hong Kong to the UK, and who will likely get a hefty dose of the Bard in their school curricula, may one day find it especially stimulating.) The book validates, in detail and in several refreshingly novel contexts, the English scholar Jonathan Bate's recent claim for Shakespeare as "the great enabler".

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