

S&B



Shakespeare Bulletin

The Journal of Early Modern Drama in Performance

Special Issue: Archives and Performing Memory

Volume 42

Number 2

Summer 2024



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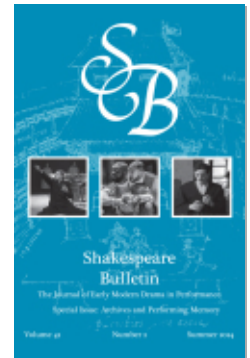
Shakespeare and East Asia by Alexa Alice Joubin (review)

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Shakespeare Bulletin, Volume 42, Number 2, Summer 2024, pp. 317-321
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.2024.a935865>



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Book Reviews

Shakespeare and East Asia. By Alexa Alice Joubin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. 258. Paperback \$25.99.

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Alexa Alice Joubin's *Shakespeare and East Asia* is a thorough exploration of Shakespeare's reincarnation via theatrical and cinematic adaptations in East Asia from the 1950s onward. It pays attention to four major themes: the innovations in sound and spectacle from Japan; the application of Shakespeare in Sinophone contexts for social reparation; the reception of South Korean presentations of gender identities onstage and onscreen; and the discourses of multilingualism, disability, and race in cinema and diasporic theater between the East and the West. Through this exploration, we can see how East Asian adaptations pioneer new musical and visual effects in representations of Shakespeare; facilitate artistic and political remediation; critique reparative analyses in literature; draw attention to discrepancies between authors and audiences in their comprehension of the same productions; and prompt us to reflect upon the importance of diversity, inclusion, and mutual understanding in a global context.

In the prologue, Joubin explains that she titled the book *Shakespeare and East Asia*—rather than *Shakespeare in East Asia*—“to signal the interplay between the two condensed cultural signifiers and to emphasize a shift away from the linear, one-way-street model of tracing the transplantation of a British ‘giant’ into a colonial cultural context” (6). Apart from providing a rigorous survey of the exchange between English and Asian Shakespeares, what is critical about Joubin's study is her meticulous research into aspects that we might overlook in our understanding of the latter's role and its significance in this exchange. Joubin notes that

Anglophone Shakespeares are assumed to have broad theatrical applicability and aesthetic merits, whereas foreign Shakespeares—even when they focus on artistic innovations on a personal rather than an epic level—are compelled to prove their political worth. Critics are on the lookout for potentially subversive political messages in these works, which are compulsorily characterized as allegories of geopolitical issues. (8)

In other words, despite their breakthroughs in performing arts onstage and onscreen, foreign Shakespeares are frequently perceived as representations of the political situation in a particular place at a specific time. This viewpoint highlights what Joubin refers to as “compulsory realpolitik,” a firmly held belief “that the best way to understand non-Western works is by interpreting their engagement with pragmatic politics” (7). To tackle this issue, Joubin reexamines Shakespearean adaptations in East Asia from a less politically focused perspective. Inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s use of “rhizome” as a botanical metaphor for nonlinear and lateral bonds between subjects, as opposed to their “arborescent” and hierarchical relationships, Joubin instead explores the artistic and social functions demonstrated through their rhizomatic links across national boundaries. In doing so, she consequently “connects what may otherwise seem to be isolated instances of artistic expression” (12), demonstrating how these productions not only “activate the historicity of a play and mobilize differences to achieve an impact onstage and onscreen,” but also “lead us away from an overdetermined concept of the canon” (21).

The main body of *Shakespeare and East Asia* is divided into four chapters. Chapter one delves into sound and spectacle, highlighting the achievements of Akira Kurosawa and Yukio Ninagawa. By analyzing Kurosawa’s renowned film *Throne of Blood* (1957) and Ninagawa’s stage production *Macbeth* (1988), Joubin illustrates how these two globally recognized directors enhance Shakespeare’s Scottish play by integrating sound and visual effects rooted in Japanese culture and extending beyond it. For instance, Kurosawa’s use of atonal sounds in the background music of *Throne of Blood* is a significant technique for establishing a sense of detachment within the film’s visual landscape. The film’s music, as Joubin points out, “mimics the position and function of the multiperson Chorus in Noh theatre—typically onstage, offering a detached perspective on the dramatic actions—and provides an aesthetic framework for the film” (35). While Ninagawa also uses sounds to enrich spectacle, he does so in a distinct manner. At the start of his stage production *Macbeth*, by using temple gongs followed by the “Sanctus” from Gabriel Fauré’s *Requiem*, Ninagawa artistically envisions the tension between the play’s major characters and foreshadows the titular character’s downfall. The hybridity of these two soundtracks occurs again at the end of the production, creating a sense of symmetry and consonance. In this instance, the juxtaposition of the decontextualized “Sanctus” and the set resembling a traditional Japanese butsudan onstage, as Joubin suggests, “both comments on the postwar emulation of western high culture in Japan and ironizes the trope of ‘lost’ westerners finding solace in enlightening Japanese spirituality” (44). Equally important, this contrast between Western and Eastern cultures in sound and spectacle may also be seen as a representation of Ninagawa’s contemplation of “the conspicuous flaw of post-World War II imagination of global cultures in stressing either homogenizing cultural sameness or irreconcilable difference” (44).

Chapter two scrutinizes the politics of remediation in performing arts. At the beginning of this chapter, Joubin states that “[p]erforming Shakespeare is

an act of remediation” that “can improve not only local art forms [. . .] but also personal and social circumstance” (63). As exemplified by the works of Kurosawa and Ninagawa in the previous chapter, “[o]nce a new locality is constructed, Shakespearean motifs and East Asian aesthetics are deployed as agents to cure each other’s perceived deficiencies, sometimes with a straight face, sometimes with parody” (64). Joubin then investigates the remedial function that selected Sinophone adaptations fulfill. She commences by examining Feng Xiaogang’s *The Banquet* (2006) and Sherwood Hu’s *Prince of the Himalayas* (2002), both cinematic adaptations of *Hamlet*. Joubin analyzes how the empowerment of Ophelia in each production not only challenges her peripheral role in the original play, but also offers a more nuanced depiction of her strength and vulnerability. Besides gender, spirituality is also a crucial aspect in performing Shakespeare as an act of remediation. In her exploration of Wu Hsing-kuo’s solo performance *Lear Is Here* (2001 and 2007), Joubin describes how this Buddhist-inflected theatrical adaptation enables Wu to transform *jingju* (Beijing opera) “into an intercultural, fusion theatre” (89) and resolve conflicts he faces on personal and professional levels, particularly regarding his dual identities as a citizen in Taiwan and as a *jingju* actor. Michael Almereyda’s cinematic adaptation *Hamlet* (2000) incorporates a similar theme. According to Joubin, it “deploys Buddhism to signal the possibility of redemption and an alternative philosophy of life” (91). More importantly, the Buddhist concept of “interbeing” that it conveys “can counteract Hamlet’s cynicism” in the original play (92). Thus, Almereyda’s *Hamlet* exemplifies how the appropriation of Asian spirituality can enrich interpretations of Shakespeare. In the remainder of the chapter, Joubin explores Anthony Chen’s vaudevillian film *One Husband Too Many* (1988) and Lee Kuo-hsiu’s *huaaju* (spoken drama) play *Shamlet* (1992), two productions that respectively satirize the remedial function of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*. In a way, they serve as counterexamples to the idea that performing Shakespeare is an act of remediation. Even so, it is noteworthy that parodies like these, as Joubin points out, affirm people’s acknowledgement of “Shakespeare’s global afterlife” and can be seen as “a sign of a society’s self-confidence” expressed through creativity and a sense of humor (98).

Inspired by the musical concept of “polyphony,” chapter three studies the reception of Shakespearean adaptations from South Korea. Joubin first focuses on Kim Myung-gon’s *King Uru*, staged at the National Theater from 2000 until 2004. Through an examination of this musical, which blends *King Lear* with the Korean myth of “Baridegi” and shamanism, Joubin illustrates how Kim allows these materials, serving as symbols of different cultures and eras, to “cross their respective centuries of creation to thrive in intertextual and transhistorical contexts” (112). Joubin’s second example is Lee Joon-ik’s blockbuster *The King and the Clown* (2005), which incorporates themes and characters from *Hamlet*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Twelfth Night*. Joubin’s interpretation of this film “through the lens of transgender and gender-fluid period drama films and the K-pop phenomenon of ‘flower boys’” (114)—and her consideration of the trans-feminine Gong-gil as an Ophelia character—is innovative; however, she could

have explored the disparity between this approach and the tendency of Korean audiences to identify gay subtext in the film, called *Wangui Namja* (“The King’s Man”) in Korean. Joubin subsequently delves into Oh Tae-suk’s theatrical adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* (2006) and *The Tempest* (2011) in England. As she points out, while Oh acknowledges that the former production “linked his own experience of North-South political antagonism with his vision for a play about enmity,” he does not view the latter in the same light (129). Oh’s *The Tempest* focuses mainly on reconciliation and forgiveness—and his Prospero is more concerned with maintaining control over ethics and creativity than with obtaining political authority. Still, many English critics, influenced by Oh’s *Romeo and Juliet*, tend to interpret *The Tempest* as a political allegory following the production’s performance in Edinburgh (130). In her analysis of the reception of Oh’s works abroad, Joubin applies Umberto Eco’s concept of aberrant decoding—defined as “the phenomenon where the receiver interprets a message differently from the intention of the sender” (120)—to explain discrepancies between artists and audiences in their comprehension of the same productions due to their distinct cultural backgrounds. The chapter invites further discussion about whether it is always necessary to establish a common ground between artists and audiences regarding their comprehension of the same productions (particularly considering Roland Barthes’s concept of the death of the author), and how we can foster more productive divergences between artists and audiences—as well as among audiences themselves—when they occur.

Chapter four sheds light on multilingualism and diaspora by examining Shakespearean adaptations primarily from Singapore. Joubin first explores Hong Kong-British director David Tse’s bilingual stage production *King Lear* (2006) in Chinese and English, emphasizing the epistemological disparity between the titular character and his youngest daughter “in terms of linguistic difference” (143). She then analyzes CheeK’s *Chicken Rice War* (2000), a cinematic adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* set in Singapore, elucidating how the film’s Wang and Chan families satirize conflicts between the Montague and Capulet families in the original play. Joubin also investigates how these conflicts signify clashes between different ethnicities, languages, and cultures in Singapore. This portrayal of conflicts not only critiques the city-state’s “hegemonic, multiracial policies informed by commercial demands and the public discourse of ethnic identities defined by multilingualism,” but also casts doubt on “the efficacy of the state rhetoric of resolving tensions within ‘an ethnically diverse population’ through harmonious multiracialism” (166–7). Finally, Joubin analyzes Ong Keng Sen’s three theatrical productions based on Shakespearean tragedies: *Lear Dreaming* (2012), *Desdemona* (2000), and *Search: Hamlet* (2002). Joubin argues that Ong’s works reflect his personal experience with diaspora and that he applies “multiple languages, supertitles, and mixed performance styles and media” as a means “to problematize the assumption that Asian and Anglo-European cultures can be condensed into ‘East’ and ‘West’” (180). Thus, it can be said that multilingual Shakespeares, as exemplified by the productions under discussion in this chapter, significantly

enrich the content and versatility of languages in drama beyond cultural origins and geopolitical demarcations. In fact, this practice mirrors what Shakespeare and his contemporaries did by “flirt[ing] with foreign tongues onstage” (181–2). That is to say, the contemporary practice of multilingual Shakespeares in East Asia by some means can be viewed as both a continuation and an evolution of the efforts of early modern English playwrights.

Through a rhizomatic exploration of global Shakespeare, Joubin’s study reveals that “neither Asia nor Shakespeare has an intrinsic, unified identity in any meaningful sense without context,” and that adaptations of Shakespeare in East Asia derive their “aesthetic and social energy from the collision and fusion of distinct cultural elements in an interstitial space” (192–3). Additionally, a noteworthy feature of this study is its integration with digital recordings available on the pages of *MIT Global Shakespeares* curated by Joubin. By embedding links to video clips of the analyzed productions within the main text instead of the endnotes, Joubin allows readers to access these online resources seamlessly between paragraphs, eliminating the need for constant page navigation. A glossary of keywords, an introduction to further scholarly reading, and a chronology of Shakespeare and East Asia provide useful supplementary resources. In summary, Joubin’s *Shakespeare and East Asia* is a comprehensive and enlightening work accessible to readers interested in the cultural exchange between the East and the West through performances of Shakespeare in various forms. Equally important, it also serves as an inspiration for future studies on global Shakespeares and their receptions.