

THE ARDEN SHAKESPEARE

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of Shakespeare

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Encountering global Shakespeare in Yemen, Kuwait and China

An interview with Katherine Hennessey

Alexa Alice Joubin

Katherine Hennessey has had the unique privilege of teaching Shakespeare in Yemen, Kuwait, China and elsewhere. Her global experiences and pedagogies will prove invaluable to the field of global Shakespeare. Alexa Alice Joubin conducted the following interview with her during the Shakespeare Association of America's annual meeting in Minneapolis on 31 March 2023.

Alexa Alice Joubin: Thank you for making time to share your experience with our readers. You have conducted research and taught in several countries, and written the field-defining book, *Shakespeare on the Arabian Peninsula*, in 2018. Could you tell us a little bit about your trajectories?

Katherine Hennessey: I've lived and worked in eight very different countries over the past fifteen years, so I sometimes feel that my academic career more closely resembles a journey through

the dark woods of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, rather than a stroll through the grounds of Duke Theseus's palace! That's not a complaint: to my mind, the more elegant and ostensibly more desirable of the two settings enforces a certain rigidity of experience in return for its greater prestige and stability. The woods, on the other hand – admittedly lonely and nerve-racking at times – hold out the constant promise of novelty, surprise and every so often, something akin to magic.

AAJ: That is an impressive intellectual journey. How did you get involved in the translation, production and study of Shakespeare in Yemen?

KH: Between 2009 and 2014, I lived in Sana'a, studying Arabic, teaching Italian literature at Sana'a University, and researching and writing about the history of Yemeni theatre and the contemporary theatre scene.

AAJ: Was there a particular Yemeni production that stood out to you?

KH: A retelling of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, set in the Hadramawt, an eastern region of Yemen famous for the mud-brick skyscrapers and pastel palaces of Yemen's 'Singaporean millionaires' – Yemeni merchants who travelled to Malaysia and Indonesia to make their fortunes, remitting money home to build their families mansions in the desert. I was intrigued by numerous aspects of this performance and wrote an article about it, which attracted the interest of the selection committee for the Global Shakespeare Research Fellowship at the University of Warwick and Queen Mary University of London. And in the UK I met you, when you were serving as the programme's Fulbright Distinguished Chair, and the depth and range of your work has had an abiding impact on my own.

AAJ: Thank you for your generosity. It is a privilege to work with you in London and in the subsequent years. Did you keep in touch with Yemeni artists while you were in the UK?

KH: I did, and towards the end of my fellowship period, I had the idea to crowd-fund a production in Yemen – to provide some of the actors and directors I know a paid gig, so they could do the work they loved and bring some joy and some sense of normalcy, however temporary, to their and their audiences' lives. This

seemed preferable to offering them a charitable handout, which it might have hurt their pride to accept.

AAJ: What you did is highly commendable, promoting global Shakespeare in practice and using Shakespeare for socially reparative purposes.

KH: I thought, in particular, of Yemeni children, traumatized by then by over two years of insurgency and conflict. Of all Shakespeare's plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* seemed the obvious choice (*pace* Jan Kott); the fairies, the magic love potions and Bottom with his ass's head would surely prompt some much-needed laughter.

AAJ: What was it like to translate the comedy into Arabic?

KH: I didn't attempt it myself. Instead, I pared down the text and engaged a translator, Subhi Al-Zuraiqi (one of my former Arabic teachers), to translate it into Yemeni Arabic. And in the meantime, I put together a crowd-funding page for a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Yemen, and generous friends and colleagues made contributions.

AAJ: What are some of the difficulties you faced while co-translating the play?

KH: Subhi and I discussed ways of making the language of the play more comprehensible to Yemeni audiences, not merely by translating it into various registers of Yemeni Arabic (formal for Theseus and company, colloquial dialect for the Rude Mechanicals) but also by referencing Yemeni history and geography.

AAJ: Could you give us an example?

KH: Of course. Demetrius's lines to Helena, 'O, how ripe in show / Thy lips, those kissing cherries, tempting grow! / That pure congealèd white, high Taurus' snow, / Fanned with the eastern wind, turns to a crow / When thou hold'st up thy hand' (3.2.142–146) were rendered as follows in Subhi's lines, here re-translated into English:

How sweet your lips look,
Like two strawberries, joined in a kiss,
Irresistible!

And when you raise your white hand,
 The snow atop Prophet Shuaib's Mountain,
 Lucid as the eastern wind that brings it, turns black . . .
 (Al-Zuraiki n.d.)

AAJ: Translation as a cultural practice is all about creating cross-cultural resonances rather than exact matches across languages.

KH: That's exactly right. The cross-cultural resonances here include the references to strawberries, which are a much more commonly available fruit in Yemen than cherries. And Jabal Nabi Shuaib is the highest peak in the Haraz Mountains outside of Sana'a (and the highest point on the entire Arabian Peninsula); it is occasionally snow-capped, in the winter months, and is named after an unheeded prophet, who according to the Quran warned a sinful town to repent or face God's wrath. It's Subhi's clever counterpoint to Demetrius's invocation of the 'irresistible' temptation of Helena's lips in the previous lines.

AAJ: Did Subhi complete the project?

KH: As the Houthis tightened their control on the city and the Saudi bombing campaign intensified, Subhi's work on the text slowed, understandably. Theatrical performances and other public gatherings halted. The translation work that I had hoped would be completed in a matter of months dragged on into years. And in the meantime, I was faced with the thorny ethical issue of having collected funding for a production that couldn't take place without potentially endangering its participants, and/or drawing upon them the scrutiny of the socially retrograde Houthis, whose power by my friends' accounts was growing more unbridled – and in some cases more vindictive and violent – by the day.

In the end I came up with a stopgap compromise: I set aside the crowd-sourced funds for a future, hoped-for performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and used an equivalent amount from my own savings to employ the Yemeni theatre-makers whom, under better circumstances, I would have engaged for that project.

AAJ: This case speaks to the very real risk of public theatre.

KH: Indeed, it does. So rather than risking a public performance, I worked with Yemeni director Amin Hazaber to make a short film entitled *Shakespeare in Yemen* (Hennessey 2018), in which the actors recited well-known excerpts from Shakespeare's plays, which Subhi translated into various registers of Yemeni Arabic. Most of the translations were quite literal, though we did adapt John of Gaunt's 'sceptred isle' speech (*Richard II*, 2.1.40–68), to make it refer to Yemen rather than England:

This royal throne of queens, this hill-ring'd haven,
Home to the masters of war,
Land of two paradises,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and her enemies' hands . . .
This jewel that shines betwixt the mountains and the silver
 sea,
Which protect her, house by house,
Stronger than the mud-brick wall of a sanctuary city,
Screening her like terraced fields
Against the eyes of the envious,
This blessed plot of earth, this realm, this Yemen . . .

The adapted passage alludes to Yemen's proud record of female rulers, including Bilqis, associated with the biblical and Qur'anic Queen of Sheba, and the long-reigning medieval Queen Arwa al-Sulayhi (c. 1048–1138); its geography of rugged mountains, steep terraces and its long coastline down the Red Sea and along the Indian Ocean; its history of *hawtas*, or 'sanctuary cities', where weapons and violence were forbidden and treaties could be brokered between feuding tribes, and its poetic appellation in Arabic as *ard al-jinnatayn*, or 'the land of two paradises'.

The actors recited these speeches in front of public buildings and landmarks in Sana'a that had been damaged or destroyed in the conflict. That is, until local Houthi representatives noticed the activity and told them to stop filming, at which point they moved into more private locations.

The film also included brief interviews with several of the actors, who described their own personal responses to the Shakespearean passages. Actor Nabhan al-Shami, who recited Macbeth's 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow' speech

in the film, said he found that ‘Shakespeare’s work is valid in every place and time. Particularly when I think of our country’s situation, of what Yemen is suffering, and all the problems that it’s facing – Shakespeare wrote about all of it. It’s as though he wrote in this place, at this time’, while actress Muna Ali, who delivered Hamlet’s ‘What a piece of work is a man’ monologue, concluded the film on this sobering note:

Shakespeare, in the 1500s and the early 1600s, wrote about a lot of things – war, and bloodshed, and things like that. He wrote about them in the past, but we’re actually living through them now. It’s like Shakespeare is living with us. And everything that’s happening now – he talked about it. So we talk about Shakespeare, we think back on Shakespeare and Shakespeare’s work – and meanwhile we’re being bombed. God help us.

AAJ: Were you involved in its production as well?

KH: I was. I had originally planned to do the video editing myself, but the performances were so unique that I opted instead to have it professionally done, and sourced a haunting traditional melody from a talented Yemeni *‘oud* player named Hamoud Al-Junaid to serve as background music. In June 2018, the film premiered at the Signature Theatre in New York City, as part of an evening event entitled *Imagine: Yemen*, which featured a set of staged readings of short plays focused on Yemen and the world’s responses (or lack thereof) to the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crises (Hennessey and Hazaber 2018). And the film is now available via the *MIT Global Shakespeares* website, which also hosts a page dedicated to the Yemeni *Merchant of Venice* performance that sparked my personal Yemeni Shakespeare odyssey.

But the Yemeni *Midsummer Night’s Dream* project remains adrift on a sea of troubles. The security situation in Sana’a has stabilized, but not yet improved to a point that public performance would be advisable. Those of my theatre-making friends who were able to leave Yemen for the relative normalcy of neighbouring countries like Egypt or Turkey have done so; those who remain are struggling to stay healthy and get their hands on basic necessities.

AAJ: Speaking of times of crisis, how did the global pandemic of Covid-19 impact your translation project with Subhi?

KH: When the pandemic hit, Subhi and I tried to put the enforced quiet to good use by completing his translation. On 6 October 2021, he wrote to me promising to shortly send me the last few pages of act 5: ‘Three or four days and everything is ready’, he said. But three or four days came and went; then a week, a month and ultimately over a year. I sent him a series of increasingly worried emails in the interim, but received no reply. Was he ill, or worse? The last phrases he translated were from Bottom’s performance as Pyramus: ‘I fear my Thisbe’s promise is forgot. / And thou, O wall, O sweet, O lovely wall . . .’ (5.1.173–174). Upon reflection, I’d say they perfectly capture both the profound sense of grief that I feel at not knowing what has become of Subhi, and the surreal absurdity of the seemingly impossible circumstances that have sprung up around this performance project.

But they’re only seemingly impossible. We may have hit a wall – O sweet, O lovely wall – but there will be a way around it. Or so I continue to hope.

AAJ: Thank you for shedding light on this artistically innovative and politically urgent co-translation project. Shall we shift gear to discuss your experience teaching in Kuwait?

KH: Of course. During the five years I spent on the faculty of the American University of Kuwait (AUK), I taught Shakespeare numerous times – three in a dedicated semester-long course, and once as part of an Early Modern Literature survey. My Shakespeare syllabus was created with student input: we always read *Hamlet*, but we would choose the other readings by class consensus. So, in Fall 2019, for example, my students voted for *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Othello*, which worked beautifully in tandem, as well as *Antony and Cleopatra*. At the end of the semester came *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the icing on the cake.

By that time, the students had all completed a performance project in which they acted out selected scenes in front of their classmates, so when we came to act 5, we did an impromptu dramatic reading of the Rude Mechanicals’ performance. Students volunteered to participate – with an alacrity that a colleague of mine who was observing the class later commented on as ‘a rarity’ in classes at AUK – and read with energy.

AAJ: While *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is commonly interpreted as a light-hearted comedy, it does explore the issues of consent. Did you offer content warnings? If so, how were the warnings received outside the North American contexts?

KH: I didn't offer a content warning before we began the play, but before we began the in-class reading I did alert my students that they might notice a bit of sexual innuendo – a perennial source of comedy for literature students in the censorious context of Kuwait – in some of the lines. Some, instantly interested, asked 'Where?' but I told them I thought they were smart enough to figure it out on their own. And they did, to judge by the initially muffled snorts and choked-back laughter from my savvier readers, and then the increasing classroom hilarity as the rest caught on, not just to the inside jokes but to the broader ones playing on the seriousness and the literality with which the Mechanicals approached their performance, and their concern that their acting would be too convincing – an aspect of the play beautifully conveyed by several of my dramatic readers, participants in AUK's Drama Club, who heroically maintained nearly straight faces for the duration, despite the waves of chortles around them.

Yet the students were sensitive to the other prevailing dynamic of the scene, in which the privileged noble characters amused themselves at the Mechanicals' expense. And in their final exams, many of my students expressed their discomfort with the play's darker elements, from Theseus' domination of Hippolyta to the artificial nature of Demetrius's love for Helena, and above all the speech by Helena where she asks Demetrius to 'Use me but as your spaniel', which many, particularly the female members of the class, found troubling. One wrote, 'Women being degraded and humiliated seems to be the underlying joke in this play, whether it's an extreme case like Hippolyta or a minor one like Titania falling for ass-headed Bottom.'

AAJ: Did *A Midsummer Night's Dream* carry over to China, the most recent country where you have taught? How do your students there respond to the comedy?

KH: When I taught it at Wenzhou-Kean University (WKU), a partnership between Kean University in New Jersey and

Wenzhou University in China, I found that many of the same reactions prevail, particularly regarding the problematic portrayal of female characters. Both times I have taught the Shakespeare class at WKU thus far, the overwhelming majority of my students have been female, and many have been keenly interested in feminist criticism and theory. My Spring 2022 students, for example, empathized profoundly with Helena's unrequited love for Demetrius and read Theseus and Oberon as authoritarian figures with dangerously unchecked powers over those around them.

I'd say my Chinese students, on average, have less fluent command of English than their counterparts in Kuwait, and have more difficulty understanding the underlying humour; many of them (though not all) read Shakespeare as deadly, literally serious. But where my AUK students were impatient with what they saw as Hippolyta's and Helena's acceptance of inferior status, my WKU students tended to read Helena as a hopeless romantic, and to sympathize with her feelings of rejection, while seeing Hippolyta as a figure who is quietly withdrawn in the face of Theseus's domination, and to interpret her withdrawal as a subtle form of resistance to his tyranny.

AAJ: It seems you return again and again to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in global contexts. Is there something unique about this comedy?

KH: That is a great question. My understanding of the play has evolved in leaps and bounds since 2016, when I saw it as the perfect play to perform for Yemeni children in what I presumed would soon be a post-conflict context. Having studied the play intensely with students in such different contexts as the crisis in Yemen continues to drag on, I've realized my assumptions were overly blithe on both counts. And Subhi's disappearance, just as the translation was nearing completion, is bound up in my mind not only with the lovers' trials and tribulations but also with the vagaries and contingencies that life throws at all of us.

AAJ: Your travel around the world with Shakespeare has not only shed a new light on various cultures you encountered but also uncovered aspects of Shakespeare's plays that have been dormant in Anglophone cultures.

KH: That is very kind of you. I do find that ‘global Shakespeare’ travels with me on my attempts to put a girdle round about the Earth, as you mentioned in the Introduction to this book, reminding me of the scintillating diversity of meaning that readers around the globe can divine in his themes and characters. Thank you very much for offering me the opportunity to discuss all of this with you.

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