

THE ARDEN SHAKESPEARE



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and Contemporary
Performance

EDITED BY

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CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	vii
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS	viii
SERIES PREFACE	xiii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	xv
Introduction	
<i>Peter Kirwan and Kathryn Prince</i>	1
PART ONE: RESEARCH METHODS AND PROBLEMS	
1.1 The archive: Show reporting Shakespeare	
<i>Rob Conkie</i>	25
1.2 The audience: Receiving and remaking experience	
<i>Margaret Jane Kidnie</i>	38
1.3 The event: Festival Shakespeare	
<i>Paul Prescott</i>	49
PART TWO: CURRENT RESEARCH AND ISSUES	
2.1 Original Practices: Old ways and new directions	
<i>Sarah Dustagheer</i>	65
2.2 Space: <i>Locus</i> and <i>platea</i> in modern Shakespearean performance	
<i>Stephen Purcell</i>	82
2.3 Economics: Shakespeare performing cities	
<i>Susan Bennett</i>	99
2.4 Networks: Researching global Shakespeare	
<i>Sonia Massai</i>	114
2.5 Global mediation: Performing Shakespeare in the age of networked and digital cultures	
<i>Alexa Alice Joubin</i>	132
2.6 Canon: Framing not-Shakespearean performance	
<i>Eoin Price</i>	151
2.7 Pedagogy: Decolonizing Shakespeare on stage	
<i>Andrew James Hartley, Kaja Dunn and Christopher Berry</i>	171
2.8 Ethics: The challenge of practising (and not just representing) diversity at the Stratford Festival of Canada	
<i>Erin Julian and Kim Solga</i>	192

2.9	Bodies: Gender, race, ability and the Shakespearean stage <i>Roberta Barker</i>	211
2.10	Technology: The desire called cinema: Materiality, biopolitics and post-anthropocentric feminism in Julie Taymor's <i>The Tempest</i> <i>Courtney Lehmann</i>	228

PART THREE: NEW DIRECTIONS IN SHAKESPEARE AND PERFORMANCE

Curated by Nora J. Williams and C. K. Ash

Anne G. Morgan	249
Jatinder Verma	251
Judith Greenwood	253
Dan Bray and Colleen MacIsaac	255
Migdalia Cruz	256
Lisa Wolpe	258
Julia Nish-Lapidus and James Wallis	260
Ravi Jain	261
Emma Whipday	263
Wole Oguntokun	265
Vishal Bhardwaj	267
Adam Cunis	268
James Loehlin	270
Denice Hicks	271
@Shakespeare	273
Yang Jung-ung	274

PART FOUR: RESOURCES FOR RESEARCHERS

4.1	Chronology: A fifty-year history of performance criticism <i>James C. Bulman</i>	281
4.2	A–Z of key terms <i>Bríd Phillips, with Peter Kirwan and Kathryn Prince</i>	302
4.3	Annotated bibliography <i>Karin Brown, Peter Kirwan and Kathryn Prince</i>	341
4.4	Resources <i>Peter Kirwan and Kathryn Prince</i>	378
	INDEX	388

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1	Chart of injuries in the MTC <i>Twelfth Night</i> , © Una Clemens.	29
2	Barakah (Hisham Fageeh) in drag in <i>Barakah Meets Barakah</i> (dir. Mahmoud Sabbagh, El Housh Productions, 2016). Screengrab.	133
3	Some goats wander into the banquet hall in the final scene of <i>The Hungry</i> (dir. Bornila Chatterjee, Cinestaan Film Company, 2017). Screengrab.	134
4	Yvan (André Jocelyn) walking past a poster advertising Laurence Olivier's film, <i>Hamlet</i> , in <i>Ophélia</i> (dir. Claude Chabrol, Boreal Film, 1963). Screengrab.	135

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Global mediation: Performing Shakespeare in the age of networked and digital cultures

ALEXA ALICE JOUBIN

Performing Shakespeare in modern times is an act of mediation between characters and actors, creating channels between geocultural spaces and time periods. Adaptations in the age of global and digital cultures are often hybrid in style and do not have one single point of cultural origin. The multiplicity of the plural term ‘global Shakespeares’ helps us push back against deceptively harmonious images of Shakespeare’s ubiquitous presence. Adaptations accrue nuanced meanings as they move through physical and digital spaces, gaining cultural significance by paying homage to or ‘remediating’ previous interpretations (Bolter and Grusin 2000). Global Shakespeares on stage and screen, therefore, constitute an artistic space for embodied identities to take shape and be contested. As a transhistorical and intermedial practice, global Shakespeares have been deployed to revitalize performance genres, resist colonial appendage and exemplify social reparation. This chapter investigates methodologies for transhistorical inquiry into culturally fluid, contemporary adaptations of early modern texts in relation to digital cultures. In juxtaposing the ways in which localities create site-specific meanings, and the ways in which cultural meanings are dispersed and reframed through ever-evolving forms of digital engagement, this chapter outlines the future challenges and opportunities for contemporary global performances.

Here are a few examples that bear contrasting cultural coordinates and yet share important things in common.

Set in modern Iran, the political play *HamletIRAN* (dir. Mahmood Karimi-Hakak, Siena College, 2011) takes place around a pool, the centrepiece in traditional Persian gardens. Despite his ardent wish to set things right, the tormented hero does not act rashly for fear his country may fall into chaos. Under an image of Mount Damavand, courtiers in turbans scheme while other characters sing Persian folk

songs. ‘Something is rotten’ in the country where the Green Movement arose in the wake of voting fraud during the 2009 presidential election. While *HamletIRAN* exemplifies political theatre, other Middle Eastern works eschew politics. *Barakah Meets Barakah* (*Baraka Yua’abil Baraka*, dir. Mahmoud Sabbagh, 2016), a rare romantic comedy film from Saudi Arabia, portrays the heterosexual love story between its middle-class male protagonist Barakah (Hisham Fageeh) and wealthy feminist fashion vlogger Barakah (nicknamed Bibi, played by Fatima AlBanawi) and their struggle against strict social conventions. When not issuing citations of minor offences as an ‘ethically conflicted’ municipal functionary (Hennessey 2018: 309), Barakah participates in amateur theatre in Jeddah. As the scene in theatre fades in, Barakah is heard reciting rather stiffly: ‘They bore him barefaced on the bier, and in his grave rain’d many a tear’. A dejected, thickly bearded Barakah appears in drag, in a blonde wig and green teal ball gown, chest hair poking out of an Elizabethan bodice. The scene serves both as comic relief and a sombre reminder of Saudi law that prohibits women from performing with men. The camera follows Barakah as he moves laterally on a small stage handing out flowers, telling an off-camera audience: ‘That’s for remembrance. Pray you, love, remember’. Improvising and interspersing the otherwise stylized lines with modern language, he continues stage right: ‘And you, take this, I would give you some violets, but they withered all when he died’. Barakah may be awkward and uncomfortable on stage, but he has a dream in which he plays Hamlet alongside his lover who plays Ophelia. Whereas *HamletIRAN* is designed and billed as an adaptation, *Barakah Meets Barakah* has not been recognized even as having any relationship to *Hamlet* (Hennessey 2018: 306–7).

Set against the backdrop of the 1955 insurgency in Kashmir, the Hindi-language crime drama Bollywood film *Haider* (dir. Vishal Bhardwaj, 2014) follows the student-poet Haider Meer’s (Shahid Kapoor) return from university to search for his missing father. Frustrated by state secrecy around civilian disappearance, Haider gathers a crowd in a market square and gives a motivational speech. A boombox with cassette player in hand, he puts a hangman’s rope around his neck to serve as an imaginary



FIGURE 2 Barakah (Hisham Fageeh) in drag in *Barakah Meets Barakah* (dir. Mahmoud Sabbagh, El Housh Productions, 2016). Screengrab.

microphone, alluding to his dire situation. He urges the crowd to reflect on the political crisis: 'Do we exist or do we not? Chutzpah is our problem!', referring to Kashmir's precarious position against India. Likewise, a father's mysterious death brings his son home to the royal Tibetan court in the period drama film *Prince of the Himalayas* (dir. Sherwood Hu, 2006). Prince Lhamoklodan (Purba Rgyal) weighs his option of exacting revenge without inflicting emotional turmoil in his mother who has married his uncle. In contrast, the whodunit thriller *The Hungry* (dir. Bornila Chatterjee, 2017) takes place almost entirely within the walls of a private estate. A riveting feature film by one of India's rising female directors, the narrative is set in the mansion and extended family of business tycoon Tathagat Ahuja (Naseeruddin Shah) in contemporary New Delhi. The film builds toward a gory dénouement, a wedding feast where widow Tulsi Joshi (Tisca Chopra) – bent on revenge for the murder of her son – meets Tathagat's cruelty, with a menu featuring human flesh. After all of the characters die, a group of black goats wander into the banquet hall to devour what is left on the table and to cleanse the sins. The grotesque gives way to a cyclical process of natural turnover.

The idea of family as citadel and a source of doom also informs other adaptations, such as the melodramatic Mexican film *Huapango* (dir. Ivan Lipkies, 2004). Otilio (Alejandro Tommasi), the richest man in Huasteca Tamaulipeca, falls in love with Julia (Lisset), the lead ballerina of a *huapango* (folk music) troupe. Souring the bond between the couple is Julia's dance partner, Santiago (Manuel Landeta), a stocky man who secretly loves her. Santiago sees Julia as part of the dancers' 'family'. In the final scene, before Otilio kills Julia, the camera moves back and forth between dead silence in the private realm and lively festive music in the public plaza. As the folk music of *huapango* 'flaunts its deeply macho discourse', the film turns 'the lord's into the lady's tragedy' (Modenessi 2012/13).

Family takes on sinister meanings of oppression, too, in postwar films. In Europe, *nouvelle vague* (New Wave) film director Claude Chabrol uses his *Ophélie* (Borealis Film, 1963) to comment on France's postwar identity and economic crisis. Son of



FIGURE 3 Some goats wander into the banquet hall in the final scene of *The Hungry* (dir. Bornila Chatterjee, Cinestaan Film Company, 2017). Screengrab.

the factory owning family Lesurf, Yvan (André Jocelyn) wanders the mansion and its grounds reciting poetry. When he stumbles upon Laurence Olivier's film version of *Hamlet* in a local cinema, Yvan sets out to become a Hamlet himself – parallel to how James Joyce's Stephen Daedalus and Goethe's Wilhelm Meister embody aspects of Hamlet. An equally melancholic and self-righteous figure also appears in Lao She's (pen name of Shu Qingchun) 1936 novella *New Hamlet*. Tian Liede is a posturing, self-proclaimed revolutionary. Like Yvan, Tian disdains his father's family business. Similar to Yvan, a chance encounter with Shakespeare changes the course of Tian's life. He is inspired by John Everett Millais's 1851 oil painting, *Ophelia*, to become the new Hamlet of modern China – a model brooding intellectual.

Performances can be allegorical on screen as well as onstage, but overworked political allegories may lose their impact. In South Africa, John Kani's landmark performance of Othello in a 1987 production (dir. Janet Suzman) at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg received critical acclaim. Kani is one of the most prominent South African actors today.¹ As the very first Black Othello in South Africa, Kani drew on the image of Xhosa warrior chiefs in his portrayal of the Moorish general (Seeff 2018: 154). In the apartheid context, Kani's presence alone was a milestone in self-representation and equality, similar to Ira Aldridge's first Black Othello in London in 1825 when exclusively white casts were the norm. The significance of Kani's and Aldridge's performances, obviously, is diametrically opposed to Laurence Olivier's blackface Othello in Stuart Burge's 1965 film version, which, in turn, inspired Ma Yong'an's performance in *Aosailuo* (Beijing Experimental *Jingju* Theatre, 1983), the first blackface Othello in Beijing opera and the first Chinese operatic adaptation of



FIGURE 4 Yvan (André Jocelyn) walking past a poster advertising Laurence Olivier's film, *Hamlet*, in *Ophélie* (dir. Claude Chabrol, Boreal Film, 1963). Screengrab.

a Western play after the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Blackface performances signified differently in South Africa, the UK and China, due to variances in social discourses about race.

In contrast, Kani's performance of Caliban in a 2009 pan-African *Tempest* (dir. Janice Honeyman) received uneven reception depending on performance venues. Coproduced by the RSC and Cape Town's Baxter Theatre Centre, the adaptation featured Antony Sher as a Prospero who kept Kani's Caliban on a tether. Caliban's costumes and make-up bore traces of a South African shaman. Within South Africa, the production was not as successful as *Othello* because by 2009 the idea of decolonization was no longer politically revolutionary. However, it received much more favourable reviews when it toured to Britain, where the postcolonial allegory helped white audiences justify enjoyment of the African carnival (Bosman 2010: 109; 113). Neither Africa nor Shakespeare has an intrinsic, unified identity without context.

SITE-SPECIFIC EPISTEMOLOGIES, NETWORKS AND POLYPHONY

This brief sampling of global Shakespeares shows that despite their divergent features, adaptations are deeply constituted by and actively shape: 1) site-specific epistemologies; 2) a dense network of cross-references; and 3) a polyphony of voices.

First, central to many of these works is the dramaturgically constructed locality – setting, performance venue and cultural reference points of the performers. Directors and performers need to find a new space between fiction and reality in which actors, characters and audiences interact. Once a new locality is constructed, Shakespearean motifs and contemporary aesthetics are deployed to structure a new narrative, sometimes with a straight face, sometimes with parody. The concept of locality encompasses a number of related ideas, including the setting of a drama, the city and venue of a performance, the cultural coordinates of the adaptation and its audience and all the meanings derived from these physical and allegorical sites.

Site-specific epistemologies – the production and dissemination of location-based meanings – inform global performances. Location-specific narratives in the adaptations unfold alongside their intricately crafted mise-en-scène with ethnographic details, revealing the physical, fictional and geocultural dimensions of the cultural work being carried out in the name of Shakespeare. Representations – performative or otherwise – signify relationally, and each locality is further constructed by interactions between local histories embedded in and superimposed on the performances. In the process of adapting Shakespeare, multiple localities are brought together to craft a new narrative. John Kani's Caliban accrues divergent meanings in Cape Town and London, leading to uneven reception. *HamletIRAN* and *Prince of the Himalayas* address topics sensitive to their locality through the floating allegorical structure of *Hamlet*, while *Haider* – set and shot in Kashmir – reconstructs local histories of insurgence through a Hamletian, existential crisis for reconciliatory and reclamatory purposes. *The Hungry*, *Huapango* and *Barakah Meets Barakah*

reference *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello* and *Hamlet* in cursory but creative fashions while mapping the politics of public affairs in Shakespeare onto domestic spaces and aesthetics in Indian, Mexican and Saudi cinemas. Site-specific networks reveal that the transhistorical connections between Shakespeare and ‘us’ are articulated both on the epic scale (such as *Haider*) and on a personal scale (as in the case of John Kani).

Site-specific ideologies also manifest themselves through censorship of or local aversion to particular plays. Japanese censors banned *Hamlet* in the 1930s due to the theme of regicide. Japan was preparing to challenge European and US dominance in international affairs. The tragedy was banned on the ground of its potential to incite rebellions against the rightist government. Around the same time, Stalin also banned *Hamlet* along with other tragic plays, for he had declared that life was more joyful for the communist state in 1935. But censorship is not the only reason that a play is not performed. For example, *Henry V* had never been staged in French in France until 1999 despite a long history of French engagement with Shakespeare including all three parts of *Henry VI*. As renowned actor Philippe Torreton (recipient of Ordre des Arts et des Lettres) puts it, French producers cannot imagine ‘Napoleon being invited to attend a representation of this triumphal English epic in the land of France’ (my translation; 2016: 117–18), especially its portrayal of the French humiliation during the Battle of Agincourt. However, in the post-Brexit context, *Henry V* is gaining traction as it evolves from ‘a patriotic, partisan drama’ into ‘one of healing and reconciliation’ (March 2019). When Torreton starred in Jean-Louis Benoît’s 1999 *La Vie du Roi Henri V* in the prestigious venue of the Honour Court of the Palais des Papes during the Festival d’Avignon, he rejoiced at the absence of French predecessors: ‘there is no one between Shakespeare and me, four hundred years since 1599’ (2016: 118), alluding to actors’ typical struggle to differentiate themselves from previous performances of the same roles. Previous productions of the same play haunt the present one by triggering some form of theatrical *déjà vu* in audiences’ memories, as explored by Marvin Carlson in his *The Haunted Stage* (2003). Translator Jean-Michel Déprats muses further that another factor hindering the French acceptance of *Henry V* is its mingling of epic, comedic and tragic modes, which goes against French imaginations of Shakespearean history plays (Lemonnier 2000: 302, 305).

Secondly, there is a dense network of cross-references. Adaptations relate more frequently to one another than to Shakespeare as sanctified source material. These examples show that non-Anglophone Shakespeares are not antithetical to English-language performances; both must negotiate pathways to contingent meanings through transhistorical and cross-cultural axes. Adaptations of Shakespeare in Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa are sometimes regarded as distinct colonial or national projects with little connection to one another. For example, Shakespeare’s reception history in South Africa is often characterized as ‘a conduit for Empire’ (Seeff 2018: 1) and Shakespeare’s presence in the Indian education system and culture is commonly regarded as a result of colonial imposition. In fact, there are more aesthetic and ideological connections among global adaptations than first meet the eye, and not all adaptations are routed through cultural hegemony. When Latin American, North American and East Asian directors connected to one another

through Akira Kurosawa's canonical film *Throne of Blood* (1957), Shakespeare's *Macbeth* receded into background noise. Alwin Bully's Dominican short, *McB* (1997), and *Macbett*, Aleta Chappelle's Caribbean film (long in development by Moon Shadow Films since 2013) spoke to Kurosawa's take on the supernatural, while an English-language stage production paid homage to Kurosawa by retaining key visual elements and even the title from Kurosawa. *Throne of Blood* (dir. Ping Chong) was staged at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2010. The Asian-American play *Shogun Macbeth* by John R. Briggs (Pan Asian Repertory, New York, 1985) featured a blind narrator who embodied visual elements from Kurosawa's mountain spirit and Macbeth's line 'Life's but a walking shadow' (5.5.24): 'Life is a lying dream, he only wakes who casts the world aside'.

Even canonical adaptations traditionally regarded as Anglophone carry cross-cultural residues. Peter Brook's production of *Titus Andronicus* (1955) in Stratford-upon-Avon (starring Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh) replaced conventional, naturalistic portrayals of horror with Asian-inspired stylization (such as scarlet streamers signifying Lavinia's blood after her rape and mutilation) and an abstract, minimalist set. Brook's work anticipated the use of red ribbons to symbolize blood in Yukio Ninagawa's production of the same play in 2006 as part of the Royal Shakespeare Company's Complete Works festival. Ninagawa treated the play as myth, because recurring ritual in a cycle is best understood through symbolism. The mostly white stage set contrasted strongly with the red streamers.

In Australian director Baz Luhrmann's campy film *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996), North American Protestantism is pitched against Latin American Catholicism, which is mapped onto cinematic interpretations of Protestant, Elizabethan England's anxiety about Catholic Italy, the setting for Shakespeare's play. Mexico City and Boca del Rio in Veracruz, the film's primary shooting locations, are dressed up as a fictional American city called Verona Beach. The fictional and geocultural localities, attitudes toward Latinity in the film and Elizabethan English fantasies about Spain and Italy are meshed together to create new localities where youthful exuberance, religious sentiments and early modern and postmodern notions of feud and hatred play out.

Likewise, Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (double A Films, 2000) appropriates the trope of despondent urban youths and Asian spirituality. Although set in twenty-first-century New York City, the film contains multiple references to Buddhism, including a clip from Ulrike Koch's documentary about a pilgrimage, *Die Salzmannen von Tibet* (*The Saltmen of Tibet*, 1997), which appears on the backseat video monitor of Claudius's (Kyle MacLachlan) limousine as he prays. Asian spirituality is appropriated in other scenes beyond this reference to Tibet. One of Almereyda's 'to be or not to be' scenes features footage of Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings on 'interbeing'. He is heard saying: 'We have the word "to be", but I propose the word "to interbe". Because it is not possible to "be" alone. We must "interbe" with everything and everyone else' on a small television. Half listening, Hamlet (Ethan Hawke) replays a video loop of himself reciting the half-line 'to be or not to be' while pointing a pistol at his temple. Global Shakespeares inhabit a post-national space where multiple cultures converge. While the media studies

theory of convergence culture describes transmedial flow of content (Jenkins 2006: 18), multiple performance styles, genres and platforms converge to form the backbone of global and digital Shakespeares. *Hamlet* may be the pretext in Chabrol's *Ophélia* and Almereyda's film, but it is merely one of the many nodes the films' narratives pass through. Other adaptations (Olivier's earlier film) and extra-textual material (Buddhism) are recruited to establish a global (English, French, American, Vietnamese) framework of intertexts. Shakespeare is neither an originary point for linear transmissions of the canon nor an authorizing presence for modes of storytelling.

Artists often work across several cultural locations, some of which lie at the crossroads of fiction and reality. The fact that global Shakespeares have become an aggregate of overlapping localities gave rise to the universalist misconception that Shakespeare is everywhere in all localities with equal valence. The local is not always the antithesis to the global or an antidote to the hegemonic domination that has been stereotypically associated with the West. Shakespeare's plays are repositioned beyond traditionally configured colonial authority.

More and more global Shakespeare performances straddle several cultural locations. Films such as *Life Goes On* (dir. Sangeeta Datta, 2009) and *As You Like It* (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 2006) create cultural locations that are neither here nor there. The British-Asian film *Life Goes On* follows the disintegration of a British-Indian family of Hindus in London. The film alludes to *King Lear* through the family's redemptive arc in which the father struggles to reconnect with his three daughters after his wife passes away. The youngest daughter Dia (Soha Ali Khan) plays Cordelia in a student production and finds echoes between *Lear* and events in her family. While Bengal, where the family emigrated from, is referenced, the actions are anchored in London. Branagh's Japanesque film, *As You Like It*, dresses up Wakehurst Place with a Zen garden, shrine gate and trappings of a nineteenth-century Japan torn between samurai and European merchants. Both the motifs in *As You Like It* and the dream of Japan are deployed ornamentally in the filmmaker's signature visual romanticism. Similarly, Desdemona Chiang's stage production of *Winter's Tale* with an Asian-American cast (Oregon Shakespeare Festival, 2016) set the romance in premodern China and the US Old West, combining both Asian and Asian-American senses of place. Such works compel us to reconsider fixed notions of locality. The cultural setting of a dramatic narrative, the geopolitical site of performance and the trajectories of the artists (where they are from, where they are going) are the primary vectors of a work's cultural and political significance.

Thirdly, location-specific meanings are governed by the polyphony of contrasting voices. While polyphony is a well-known concept in musicology, it was introduced to literary studies by Mikhail Bakhtin in his analysis of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels. I use polyphony in both the literal and the metaphorical senses to discuss the synthesis of different voices, accents, body language and music on stage, as well as contrasting voices in reception of touring productions. Part of the pleasure of watching adaptations lies in recognizing allusions. Even the faintest echoes of Shakespeare constitute what Kathleen McLuskie calls 'attenuated' allusions (2015: 334). *Ophélia* echoes Daedalus, Wilhelm Meister and Lao She's New Hamlet across history and

culture, deploying the archetype of Hamlet to capture the figure of the despondent in distinctively local contexts. *Ophelia* also references Olivier's film version of *Hamlet* as part of a non-linear network of cross-references. In the play-within-a-film in *Barakah Meets Barakah*, one hears echoes of familiar lines by Ophelia and sees references to – despite Barakah's clumsy performance – the iconic scene where the mad Ophelia hands out flowers. The themes of jealousy and domestic violence link *Huapango* to *Othello*. Viewers familiar with *Hamlet* would hear echoes of the tragedy in *Haider* despite divergences in plot and characterization. Beyond the archetypal narrative of a son avenging his father, there are other parallels and echoes between the two works: talented journalist Arshia Lone (Shraddha Kapoor) is pushed by her father and brother onto a path leading toward Ophelia's tragic end; the figures of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern morph into the video-store owners Suman and Suman; Haider's uncle, a Claudius figure, is depicted as corrupt and cunning.

Intertextual echoes take a different form in Almereyda's *Hamlet*, morphing from Hawke's Hamlet's footage of his brooding self into Thich Nhat Hanh's lecture, trivializing Hamlet's self-indulgence while offering the Buddhist teaching of interconnectedness as a nobler model. The echoes pitch the individualistic, existential question of being against the Buddhist, community-oriented mode of interbeing. As Terence Hawkes argues, phrases and ideas from *Hamlet* have been so deeply embedded in everyday speech that it operates simply as 'a web of quotations'. Several of the works cited above exemplify polyphonic echoes. As a 'universal cultural reference point', *Hamlet* functions as 'a piece of social shorthand' (2012: 4). The 'to be or not to be' speech is familiar enough to most audiences to allow for recognition even when rewritten as 'interbe'. The fragmentary allusions to Shakespeare are part of a process of 'Shakespeareization', the formation of social shorthand (Ridden 2013/14).

Site-specific polyphony is also deeply constituted by actors' accents and cadence '[i]n states unborn and accents yet unknown' to Shakespeare (*Julius Caesar*, 3.1.113). Accent is as important as racialized and gender differences in global performances in shaping embodied identities. As Sonia Massai observes, accents as 'markers of social identity' are often used in performances to 'activate a different interpretation of the fictive worlds of the plays and to challenge a traditional alignment of Shakespeare with cultural elitism' (2020: 3). In many of the cases analysed so far, accents are obscured by subtitles, while other adaptations thematize dialects and accents as key vectors of difference in their aural landscape. Accents and other sonic registers such as intonation – along with audiences' listening habits – collectively form a repository of racial and ethnic identities. Indeed, listening is far from a passive or neutral act. Jennifer Lynn Stoevers' research reveals that 'listening operates as an organ of racial discernment, categorization, and resistance' (2016: 4). Audiences may listen attentively and selectively to their preferred accent while mishearing unfamiliar accents.

In the Singaporean romantic comedy *Chicken Rice War* (dir. Chee Kong Cheah [CheeK], 2000), the stylized language of *Romeo and Juliet* is heard from an ironic distance as some characters recite their lines with Singaporean accents in a college

production within the film. When not involved in the play-within-the-film, the characters speak local dialects. Fenson, a dialect-speaking local student, competes with Nick, an English-speaking mixed-race Eurasian, for the role of Romeo. As a son of working-class parents, Fenson's identity is diametrically opposed to that of Nick, who represents Westernized modernity. Through rote memorization of Romeo's lines, Fenson eventually wins the role. The play-within-the-film is staged in front of the students' families. Echoing the actors' offstage life, the production has the low-ranking characters – such as Tybalt and Benvolio – speak in Cantonese, while Romeo and Juliet use Shakespeare's lines. As Fenson and Audrey, in a mix of English and Cantonese, perform the 'balcony' scene, in which Romeo and Juliet meet after the masked ball, their offstage parents become more and more impatient with their public display of affection, mirroring the behaviours of Romeo's and Juliet's parents. The older, parental generation is emotionally detached from and intellectually excluded by the younger generation's Anglophone education, symbolized by their enactment of Shakespeare. The inter-generational gap is also marked linguistically. Despite their rivalry, the parents of Fenson and Audrey share the same dialect: Cantonese. The younger generation speak Singlish. In the film's multilingual terrain, racialized differences between the mixed-race Eurasian and local characters of Chinese, Malaysian and Indian descents are coded linguistically: accents, mannerisms and code-switching between different dialects. In Singapore as in the film, standard British English is regarded as superior to Singlish, which, in turn, is superior to other languages and dialects. Singlish is a colloquial creole based on words and grammatical features taken from vernacular English, Malay and Mandarin. In the context of Singapore's policy of multilingualism, this polyphonic universe rubs against the government's slogan that Singapore is the 'New Asia' and the ongoing 'Speak Good English' campaign backed by the state.

Adaptations are nurtured by competing and even conflicting voices, and polyphony includes differing and sometimes contradictory voices. The relative significance of artistically constructed echoes in the polyphonic ecosystem is dependent on audiences' site-specific knowledge. The echoes an audience hears, however, depend on their reading habits and theatre-going history. The Shakespeare polyphony sustains multiple voices of the directors and critics without subordinating any one perspective. As global Shakespeares are quoted in and out of context in a wide range of accents, the meanings of the polyphony fluctuate, because they depend on the site-specific knowledge and experiences of the observers.

GOING VIRAL DIGITALLY DURING COVID-19

In tandem with global tourism, digital videos have facilitated the circulation of disembodied, site-specific meanings of Shakespeare. The rise of global Shakespeares is inseparable from the prevalence of digital video on commercial and open-access platforms, because these platforms provide inter-connected, instantaneous forms of communication for site-specific epistemologies. Distinct from analogue media such as photography, digital video – as a non-linear, non-sequential medium – can

support instant access to any sequence in a performance, as well as the means to reorder and annotate sequences, and to bring them into meaningful conjunction with other videos, texts and image collections (Joubin 2011: 43). As Alvin Lim notes, the 'site-specificity' of digital archives parallels the site-specific reenactment of live performances (2017: 201). Viewing digital Shakespeare as an asynchronous, performed event can help us connect live performances to the concepts of rehearsal and re-play.

The outbreak of the global pandemic of COVID-19 caused by SARS-CoV-2 (severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus) in early 2020 closed live theatre events and cinemas worldwide, but the crisis – during which global travel and national borders were shut down – also ushered in a new phase of globalization fuelled by digital videos as at-home audiences took to streaming to engage with Shakespeare. The pandemic has led to a proliferation of born-digital and digitized archival videos of Shakespeare in Western Europe, Canada, the UK and the US. Digital streaming – live or pre-recorded, synchronous or asynchronous – has helped Shakespeare go viral on a global scale, and the pandemic is accelerating that process. Like any virus, global Shakespeares adapt quickly to their new, digital host environment. In tandem with the spread of coronavirus, there is a global viral spread of Shakespeare via digital videos that carry site-specific meanings with them in disembodied forms. An idea or motif goes viral when a large number of people share within a short period of time 'a specific information item ... within their social networks, and where the message spreads beyond their own networks to different, often distant networks, resulting in a sharp acceleration in the number of people who are exposed to the message' (Nahon and Hemsley 2013: 16). In the twenty-first-century, this process is fuelled by digital tools of networking, and what becomes viral on 'sociotechnical networks' is exactly what performances of Shakespeare provide: 'contagious affect, feelings, and emotions' (Sampson 2012: 3).

The lockdown and stay-at-home orders – measures to contain spread of the virus – have accelerated digital globalization, redefining liveness along the way. As Pascale Aebischer suggests, as a 'chronological order' (2020) that seems to slow down time, the lockdown motivates at-home audiences to transcend their temporality by engaging in escapism. Equally important are the spatial constraints of the viral containment measure. Mobility – even within one's neighbourhood – is severely limited. Audiences who are now 'bounded in a nutshell' (*Hamlet*, Folio 2.2.252) seek virtual connections that transport them beyond their now fixed geographic locations to an alternative universe. If digital broadcasting in the past few years has diversified 'liveness as a temporal and spatial entity' (Sullivan 2018: 62), asynchronous digital videos do not so much replicate theatrical experiences as they enable experiential and affective quality on the small screen. Detached from the palpable bodily presence of actors, viewers' own subjectivity is also disembodied (Aebischer 2020).

During the crisis, ongoing at the time of writing, Western European and North American amateur and professional groups from school projects to New York's Public Theater performed live using video conference tools such as Zoom and social media platforms such as TikTok, making all the world their digital stage. Some of them had a global, multilingual audience in mind. The Public Theater's online

initiative, *Brave New Shakespeare*, posted their actors reading *Romeo and Juliet* 2.2 in multiple languages and invited the general public to share their own. Actors and audiences also flocked to participatory events (*The Tempest*, ‘live, interactive, and in your living room’, hosted by Creation Theatre Company and Big Telly Theatre Company) as well as virtual discussion of streaming to overcome the isolation of physical, social distancing in the era of COVID-19 (as in Fundación Shakespeare Argentina’s play readings on Facebook). Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, DC, hosted weekly virtual events entitled ‘Shakespeare Hour LIVE!’ which featured STC’s artistic director Simon Godwin in conversation with actors (Liev Shreiber, F. Murray Abraham, Stacy Keach and others) and scholars (Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Bate and James Shapiro). The episodes were free for members and \$10 for non-members. Despite their efforts, the STC was forced to lay off a third of its full-time staff and cut its budget by 44 per cent starting July 2020 (Marks 2020b).

To maintain or increase their visibility, and as part of their fundraising campaigns during COVID-19, theatre companies broadcast live or asynchronously to audiences around the world. Professional companies released pre-recorded videos on a time-limited basis at pre-scheduled intervals, replicating the ephemerality and limited availability of live theatre. The pressured – though asynchronous – schedule drummed up excitement and upped the ante of competition against other companies who had also gone digital. A majority of these events were free, while others sold tickets at a fraction of the price for live shows. The Blackfriars Playhouse of the American Shakespeare Center sold tickets to shows in their 2020 season on BLKFRSTV, a new streaming platform, which ‘bring[s] the Playhouse to you, since audiences can’t come to the Blackfriars’ (ASC 2020). Other key players in digital video broadcasting during the pandemic included the Berliner Ensemble, La Comédie-Française, Shakespeare’s Globe in London, Royal Shakespeare Company, National Theatre, Stratford Festival in Canada and the Folger Theatre.

Despite the challenges that the pandemic has brought to live theatre, it has also helped a few companies reach mass global audiences on an unprecedented scale. As of 18 May 2020, the Globe’s YouTube channel had attracted 1.9 million viewers for all of their videos (Neil Constable qtd in Dam 2020), while the Donmar Warehouse’s *Coriolanus*, starring Tom Hiddleston, on National Theatre Live garnered more than half a million views and raised US\$ 20,691 between 4 and 11 June 2020. The number of views far exceeds the number of audiences a live production could ever reach within the same one-week period (the Donmar auditorium has only 251 seats; even the National Theatre has a total of only 2,417 seats across its three venues). Since an entity can only earn at most around \$1,000 from advertisement revenue for a YouTube video with even half a million views (Zach 2020), financial gains remain ancillary to these online projects. Further, not all productions translate well to the streaming format on the small screen (Marks 2020a). Digital broadcasting is deployed as a symbolic means to maintain connection with the companies’ current and future patrons and, more importantly, to encourage donation. It is a crucial tool to help theatre companies remain relevant in a time of crisis. In its bid for support from the UK’s Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the London Globe

has cited the large number of views of their free YouTube channel as evidence of the ‘huge appetite for culture at a time of national crisis’ (Dam 2020). Largely supported by self-generated revenue and with a predominantly international tourist audience, the Globe is unusual among major UK theatres in not being funded by Arts Council England, leading to concerns early in the crisis about its financial precarity.

As comforting, familiar go-to-material for uplifting the spirits (W. B. Worthen qtd in Soloski 2020), Shakespeare skyrocketed to the top of the list of digital performance events during the pandemic in the forms of memes (e.g. Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* during the plague), quotable quotes, performances of select scenes and full productions. The MIT *Global Shakespeares* open-access digital performance video archive (co-founded and codirected by Alexa Alice Joubin and Peter S. Donaldson), for example, saw a dramatic fourfold growth in internet traffic of 403.23 per cent between January 2020, just before COVID-19 became a global pandemic, and late April 2020, when 54 per cent of the global population (4.2 billion people) were subject to complete or partial lockdowns (WHO 2020). This was a fivefold growth in traffic compared to the same period in 2019. The increase in number of unique visitors to the peer-reviewed, vetted open-access site was particularly evident from South America, Europe, India and East Asia.² The MIT project provides free online access to performances from many parts of the world as well as peer-reviewed essays and vetted metadata provided by scholars and educators in the field. As a curated and crowd-sourced archive, MIT *Global Shakespeares* suggests videos of potential interest based on the user’s history. There are also several educational modules that are built upon a database of videos.

The site’s traffic data further suggests that visitors tend to sample and compare pivotal scenes across productions (such as the division-of-the-kingdom scene in contrasting adaptations of *King Lear*) rather than lingering to watch performances in their entirety. ‘Distracted concentration’ (Aebischer 2020) – variegated pathways through multiple performances – is as much a feature of piecemeal consumptions of global Shakespeares as it is a function of the global Internet economy. Akin to the practice of channel surfing on television, distracted concentration propels the consumption of digital videos in a fragmentary manner. In contrast to cinema or live theatre, asynchronous digital videos – networked and non-linear in nature – do not require audiences to sit through an entire show in one go. Uses of Hamlet’s soliloquy of ‘to be or not to be’ in a wide range of films are a prime example of how Shakespearean motifs and language circulate globally in attenuated allusions and fragmented citations.

While the part cannot stand in for the whole, there are unique advantages to distracted concentration as an intellectual exercise. Viewing a clip of Cordelia’s silent protest from Peter Brook’s existentialist 1971 film of *King Lear* and a clip of Lear’s reaction from Grigori Kozintsev’s *Korol Lir* (1971) may give partial or false impressions of the aesthetics and overall agendas of these directors. However, viewing performances in this ‘distracted’ fashion helps to resist the tyranny of the few canonized adaptations and their privileged interpretations. Consuming performances through arbitrary as well as curated pathways sheds new light on performances that do not tend to be discussed side by side, such as Brook’s and

Kozintsev's films of *Lear*, Akira Kurosawa's contrasting tragic vision in *Ran* (1985) and the aforementioned Buddhist-inflected *Hamlet* by Almereyda. When new pathways – enabled by digital tools – open up, so do new interpretive possibilities.

Juxtaposing the clips of the division-of-the-kingdom scene, for example, allows us to re-examine the critical tendency to explain Lear's problems away as part of a perceived ethical burden. The scene in Brook's film version is dominated by close-ups of Lear and other characters, framing Paul Scofield's Lear as a solemn statue. In contrast to Laurence Olivier's Lear in the made-for-television film (dir. Michael Elliott, 1983), who laughs off Cordelia's initial response, Scofield's Lear speaks methodically and remains stern throughout the scene, which ends with him calmly banishing Cordelia. Cordelia's aside is cut, thereby diminishing the weight of a potentially revelatory moment as well as Cordelia's self-discovery. Placed side by side with *Ran* and other versions that contain elements of merriment, this scene in Brook's film sets a much more sinister and nihilistic tone for the entire narrative. Drawing on one single line by Goneril ('When he returns from hunting / I will not speak with him', 1.3.8–9), Kurosawa presents a lavish, extended opening scene of boar hunting. It has become a critical commonplace to read Lear's story as the devolution of a man with privileges to an unaccommodated animal. The wild boar is a metaphor for Hidetora's (Lear) degeneration from the hunter to the hunted. However, the film's Buddhist framework hints at Hidetora's reincarnation in the form of a boar after death. Drawing on Shinto Buddhism that posits porous lines between humanity and the natural world, *Ran* places its characters firmly among the animals and in an epic natural landscape. Hidetora frequently asks where he is rather than who he is. Scofield's Lear suffers from a similar identity crisis, but he is at the same time firmly planted in his solitude and tragic immobility. External, sartorial signs of regality are largely absent in Scofield's Lear. In contrast to Elliott's film, this scene in Brook's film does not treat the division of the kingdom ceremonially. Binge-watching different versions of the same play leads to new research questions that do not seek to explain Lear's problems away or legitimize the characters' suffering. Are Lear's daughters implicated as a source of the tragedy of *King Lear* that has been said to be coded masculine? Does Cordelia's hanging enhance the tragic pathos surrounding her journey, or does it help to highlight the senseless male suffering? How does *Lear* speak to cultures far removed politically and historically from early modern England, and make certain themes of contemporary cultural life more legible, such as the generational gap, filial piety, loyalty and duty?

Three observations can be made of the current, digital phase of global Shakespeares in relation to: 1) a user-centric culture; 2) the rise of Shakespeare on the small screen; and 3) digital ghosting.

First, the current, digitally enhanced wave of global Shakespeares has turned audiences into users of the Shakespearean canon and motifs, prioritizing user participation as 'the central tenet of [the] organizational structure' of Web 2.0 (Fazel and Geddes 2017: 3). User-centric tools empower and disseminate user-generated content in equitable forms globally. Students have been re-envisioned as users in digital cultures in recent years (Carson and Kirwan 2014: 244), and now the pandemic has converted the general public into users of global Shakespeares.

User-centric interactions with Shakespeare's plays supplant the reader-centric mode of engagement, which in turn replaced the oral culture of Shakespeare's times. Digital videos, obviously, are not a magic bullet, as they require substantial bandwidth and resources to access. However, despite the challenge of maintaining net neutrality and equal access, generally speaking, in a decentralized model of networked, digital culture, the users have more direct engagement with, if not control over, multi-modal representations of events.

Secondly, the rise of performances on the small screen has important implications for global Shakespeares. The duality of text and performance is no longer a problem to be diagnosed, but rather an opportunity to be explored. Shakespeare on the small screen operates with 'an individuated integrity while also engaging in shifting relationships' with other media such as the codex book and digitized facsimile of an early modern text with marginalia (Desmet 2017). As opposed to cinematic Shakespeare and live-broadcast Shakespeare on the big screen, Shakespeare on the small screen is inherently global in its mobility and reach. Small-screen Shakespeare includes films intended for the multiplex but reformatted for home consumption either in their afterlife or out of necessity during the pandemic; curated, digitized videos of productions; the often Quixotic, parodic, ad hoc videos of YouTube (which are inherently unstable and ephemeral); and films on DVD for personal use. In addition to personal computers and televisions, small-screen Shakespeares appear on mobile phones, tablets, handheld devices, apps and other forms of archival and pedagogical experience that actively encourage and even obligate user curation and interaction with the cultural records. Big-screen Shakespeares support a more communal viewing experience, while small-screen Shakespeare gives the users more control. In W. B. Worthen's words, the 'technologies of performance' put play-texts and performances – whether text-based or not – to work in an interactive environment (2010: xvi and 34). Shakespeare on the small screen combines the workings of the technologies of representation and the literary foundation of performance behaviours.

Thirdly, dynamically co-constituted by the technologies of representation and a repertoire of evolving, shared knowledge, digital Shakespeares destabilize and expand the repertoire, leading to the phenomenon of digital ghosting. In a media-rich environment, different versions of the same play would haunt a user's experience with the story. As Danielle Rosvally theorizes, when users are able to pause an encounter with an iteration of a Shakespearean theme, multiple 'activation points for knowledge economies' become more easily accessible. Users can put one video on hold while opening another video to gather more information before resuming the encounter (2017: 151). They can mesh the contrasting versions or view them side by side. Small-screen Shakespeares redistribute the power of collecting, rearranging and archiving cultural memories away from a centralized authority to the hands of users (Derrida 1995: 3). The repertoire of global Shakespeares thus expands to include not only performative kinetic energy but also the rich networks of instantaneous cross references.

While in the 1990s one typically encountered global Shakespeare for the first time through film or theatre, in our times the initial encounters occur predominantly

on digital platforms in the form of video clips, memes or quotes. It has become more common for non-professional readers and audiences to encounter global Shakespeares in fragmented forms, such as the Ophelia scene in *Barakah Meets Barakah*. Global Shakespeares thrive in hybrid cultural and digital spaces, moving through and beyond such traditional and emerging metropolitan centres as London, Craiova, Edinburgh, New York, Shanghai and Tokyo. Global Shakespeares are a transhistorical phenomenon rooted in variously articulated cultural and digital locations, because site-specific epistemologies carry weight ideologically when art is produced in post-national spaces where cross-cultural borrowings are the norm. There are multiple non-hierarchical entry points for motifs to flow through disparate cultural spaces and through genres of stage and screen. To further our understanding of Shakespeare in a post-national and post-pandemic era, it is important to engage with the hybrid cultural themes that inform many adaptations.

NOTES

1. Recipient of the Order of Ikhamanga, John Kani is recognized for his contributions to 'theatre and ... the struggle for a non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa' (South African Government 2005). The main venue in Johannesburg's Market Theatre was renamed John Kani Theatre in his honour. Globally Kani is celebrated for his performance of T'Chaka in the blockbusters *Captain America: Civil War* (dir. Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, Marvel Studios, 2016) and *Black Panther* (dir. Ryan Coogler, Marvel Studios, 2018). He also voiced Rafiki in *The Lion King* (dir. Jon Favreau, Walt Disney Pictures, 2016).
2. In contrast to visits or 'hits', 'unique visitors' refers to the number of people who visit a given website. A unique visitor is a distinct individual who may visit a site once or multiple times; the individual is counted just once.

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