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# Shakespeare Alive

Conversations about Shakespeare's place in the 21st Century



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Our guests for our latest series includes: Bill Barclay, Former Director of Music at the Globe Theatre; Michael Witmore, Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library; and, Alexa Alice Joubin, Professor of English at George Washington University.

We ask our guests and listeners to share one modern-day item that they think should be included in an imagined Shakespeare museum of the future. What do you think of their choices, and what would you choose? Let us know at [shakespeare.org.uk/future](https://shakespeare.org.uk/future)

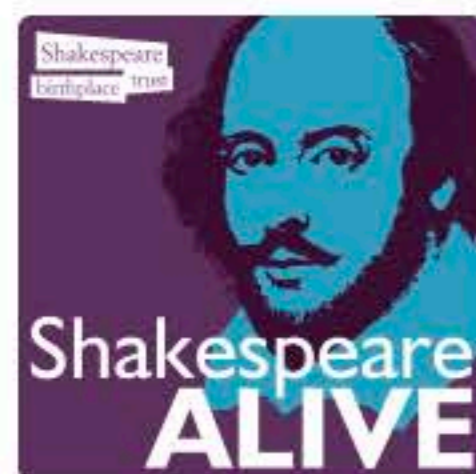
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Shakespeare Alive

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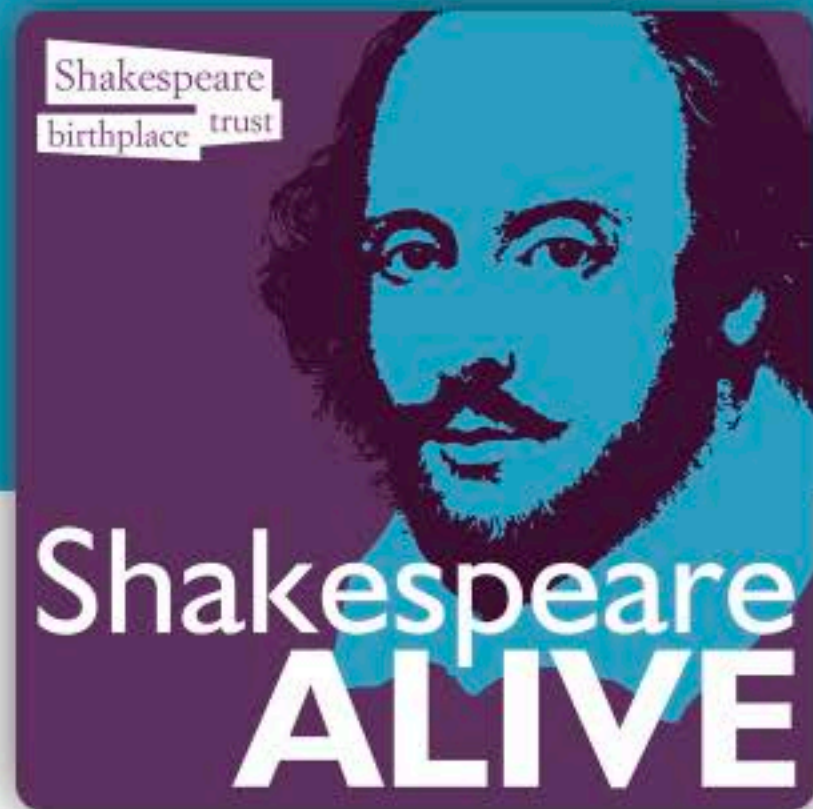


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Shakespeare and East Asia with Alexa Alice Joubin

MAY 11, 2021

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**Shakespeare and East Asia with Alexa Alice Joubin**

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TRANSCRIPT

Alexa, Professor of English at George Washington University, talks to Anjna about her fascinating research and new book, *Shakespeare and East Asia* (OUP, 2021). Covering everything from *Romeo and Juliet* in Singlish, to Japanese productions of *King Lear*, Alexa offers a crucial and much-needed insight into the political as well as cultural significance of Shakespeare across East Asia. She also chooses a coveted delight from our collection, and makes a superb suggestion for a Singaporean addition to our archive.

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# Shakespeare Alive

Shakespeare and East Asia with Alexa Alice Joubin

MAY 11, 2021 SHAKESPEARE BIRTHPLACE TRUST  
Shakespeare Alive



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SHARE EPISODE



## TRANSCRIPT

Anjna Chouhan:

Welcome to *Shakespeare Alive*, a podcast from the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. My name's Anjna and today it's my pleasure to introduce Alexa Alice Joubin, who has the most extraordinary title. She is Professor of English, Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies, Theater, International Affairs, and East Asian Languages and Cultures at George Washington University, in Washington, D.C. So Alexa writes about cultural globalisation, Shakespeare, race, gender, and film and theatre adaptations; and she co-founded the open access platform, *Global Shakespeares*, which is hosted by MIT. And so this ties in really nicely with her interest in digital humanities. And naturally she is the founding co-director of the Digital Humanities Institute at George Washington University.

So right now, Alexa is writing a book called *Staging Transgender Shakespeare on the Screen* with Cambridge University Press, to which we'll perhaps have to dedicate an entire

future episode because today we're discussing Alexa's work on race and global Shakespeares, notably in relation to her book, *Shakespeare and East Asia* with Oxford University Press, which was released earlier on in 2021.

So a very warm welcome Alexa, to *Shakespeare Alive*. It's wonderful to have you with us. Can I start by asking you about your title? Because it's so extraordinarily broad, where does one begin with all of this?

Alexa Alice Joubin:

This reflects my teaching interests and my intellectual communities - where I call home. And in the English department, I teach Early Modern Studies, Shakespeare, Race and Gender Studies, which overlaps then with what we call WGSS, the Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies. There's a fair amount of crossover between the Humanities and social sciences. I very much appreciate that. What I offer is methods to analyse gender issues for our students there, with complex texts and Shakespeare's one of the complex texts. You can call it a playground, a laboratory, a social experiment. You do not personally have to experience all the oppressions before being able to understand the complex issues or develop empathy. And so that's where I see Humanity's contributions while my primary home remains English, but I engage with all of those communities.

Anjna Chouhan:

Well that's so much that you covered there. And it's all so fascinating. Alexa, just to borrow the phrase that you used earlier, Shakespeare becomes a kind of laboratory or playground that pools all of your subject areas together. I wonder if you could tell our listeners about your route to Shakespeare, Alexa.

Alexa Alice Joubin:

I was born and raised in Taiwan, mostly educated there, but I discovered Shakespeare in translation in Taiwan, in classes. But then afterwards I had an opportunity to be an exchange student in Germany and believe it or not, that's actually where I rediscovered Shakespeare. How come Shakespeare is the most frequently performed playwright there compared to say Goethe or Schiller, but that really led me down the path of global Shakespeare, of studying the globalisation, the global travels of Shakespeare place in the 20th and 21st century.

So from Germany, I immigrated to California to study at Stanford. During my graduate training I chose Shakespeare and early modern studies as my focus with a trans-historical link, meaning that I connected Shakespeare's plays to their contemporary afterlife. I co-

wrote a book just called *Race* with post-colonial theorist Martin Orkin. If we want to do real anti-racist work, we should never sweep these difficult texts under the carpet, because that's such a cop out! We should instead continue to confront them, engage them and perhaps answer the difficult questions they raised for us. So that's my route to Shakespeare, it involves global travels, physically. It involves intellectual travels as well, across different historical time zones. And eventually after I finished my training, I gradually moved east. So now I'm located in Washington DC. It's a privilege to teach global Shakespeare in downtown Washington DC. Only a couple blocks from the white house. And as we discuss the arts here, we always have politics in mind. How can arts serve the society? Perhaps help us address sensitive/ difficult to discuss questions? I find that that literature - Shakespeare in particular, right, it's a text that's complex enough and capacious enough. There's this third space: we are not talking about anything personal. We are discussing this narrative, like I said, earlier it's a , laboratory, if you will. And in there, that's where we can have perhaps a discussion on equal footing and it's both therapeutic an eye opener.

Anjna Chouhan:

Yes, absolutely Alexa! And it's interesting that you're talking about Shakespeare as an almost, sort of, neutral space. And this ties in really nicely with your monograph on *Shakespeare and East Asia* for Oxford university press. And I'm curious about how you tie in this idea of Shakespeare as this 'neutral territory', if you like.

Alexa Alice Joubin:

There is certain level of neutrality to it, isn't it. Even if Shakespeare's plays, as I said earlier, are complex texts with ideologies and biases on the part of the characters, they do provide a platform for artists to speak allegorically. And I think the capacity to speak allegorically is actually very important in these prolific contentious times. So with my book, *Shakespeare and East Asia*, what I wanted to do was to decolonise Shakespeare but also to expand the purview of post-colonial studies itself. Because the field tends to focus on British colonialism for good reasons, but that narrow focus can be a problem.

And there's this focus on Anglophone colonies: countries that do not fully aligned with narrowly defined colonial experiences, such as Korea and Japan, for example, have been neglected. I seek to decolonise the study of non-Western cultures as well. So non Western adaptations of the Western Canon. And my research reveals deep connections among different cultures. So it's not about Shakespeare coming to East Asia or East Asia looking up to Shakespeare, but actually it's in connections like a spider's web in many different

directions and connections between Korea and Japan. Connections between - unexpected connections in a film like Michael Almereyda's film *Hamlet*, set in 2000, Manhattan. And in there you find this deep connection in the form of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, giving an alternative version of 'to be or not to be'. So that's kind of an American appropriation of both Shakespeare and Buddhism. And by the late 20th century, Shakespeare has actually become one, one of the most frequently performed playwrights in East Asia. And that's really surprising, and by looking at this whole history through a new postcolonial lens, we can decolonise not just Shakespeare as a classic, but also post-colonial studies itself by asking readers to, 'hey, pay attention to non -Anglophone colonies'. How about in South Korea? The Anglophone globalisation of its colonial history is actually not a source of anxiety, Japanisation is because Korea was colonised by Japan. So what happens then to something like Shakespeare in this space? It's not neutral, but very useful. It's usefully foreign because he's not Asian, he's not Japanese above all else. And so the Korean adapters, use Shakespeare to launch a post-colonial discourse about the oppression they suffer under Japanese annexation, right? And so Shakespeare is not always a coloniser . I think that's the surprising story you're finding in my book, how Shakespeare travels enables various kinds of stories to be told. And those stories are not always related to British imperialism or colonisation.

Anjna Chouhan:

It's so interesting Alexa hearing you talk about this and it really does highlight your emphasis on the idea of Shakespeare as not just laboratory, but also neutral territory, in that you can open up dialogues about cultural oppression, have nothing to do with the West at all, or cultural experiences that are specific to all the many countries, languages and peoples that fall under the very wide umbrella of East Asia. You mentioned that relationship between South Korea and Japan, but also as somebody that hails from Taiwan, the relationship between Taiwan and China and how Shakespeare is used within that and the language as well. You talked about Taiwanese earlier. Can you tell me more about the relationship between Taiwanese and Shakespeare, and Shakespeare and performance in Taiwan?

Alexa Alice Joubin:

That's another interesting pairing. You have Korea versus Japan and of course, China versus Hong Kong, China versus Taiwan and Tibet. All of these kinds of very troubled territory. And in my research, I have noticed Taiwanese adaptations of western classics in general and Shakespeare in particular... so there are more multilingual, more bilingual multi-lingual productions. They use various dialects, Taiwanese included and Mandarin



Chinese, and so on. Sometimes English, there's more connection to the European *avant-garde*, while Chinese productions, I mean those among the Chinese mainland, they have formed their own monolingual tradition, and that's an interesting contrast. As you may have anticipated, there's this tension between Taiwan and China politically.

So there's deep seated anxiety about national identity, who they are. Are they somehow Chinese or are they related to the Chinese culturally, just like the US and the UK? And yet it's an independent country. All, that is reflected in the arts. And you will see adaptations of Shakespeare, that focus on topics such as diaspora, where self and national identities. *King Lear*, what's important there, not just for the artists and audiences to explore such topics like generational gaps or filial piety; and that parental figure sometimes. According to some credits seems to be a stand-in for China - the fatherland, that more and more Taiwanese now reject. So this really is an interesting cultural space to look at international arts. The same with Hong Kong. Hong Kong is even more complex. Hong Kong finds itself at a crossroads of mainly Chinese culture. It's local Cantonese culture that's really at the margin of the Chinese empire. And then of course the British legacy that the British only left Hong Kong in 1997. So it's fairly recent. And yet a lot of the Hong Kong people now see themselves being colonised by China.

So they do Shakespeare simultaneously in Cantonese and in English. Shakespeare in English so ironic in that location is a form of resistance to Mandarin Chinese culture. You know, with Beijing accent that they try to impose on them. So all of these, they have very interesting relationship to British and American globalisations. Sometimes they recruit Shakespeare as a usefully foreign presence as an English-speaking agent for their political purpose, just because Shakespeare is as far away as possible from anything Mandarin Chinese.

So again, Hong Kong it's a typical postcolonial location, part of the Commonwealth, but it's very different from a place like India or even Singapore. One of my interests is actually reparative Shakespeare. So how do people use a classic like Shakespeare to launch social reparation, they're different directions. So in one sense, it's as simple as reading Shakespeare makes you a better person. In the other sense it's engaging with Shakespeare can repair our political situation. Their censorship of Shakespeare allows us to speak because the census rarely cut Shakespeare.

And then there are parodies particularly out of Hong Kong, really clever, witty parodies that poke fun at both the reparative compulsion, the assumption that the classics make us better people. And the idea that the arts can actually intervene in politics. So it's actually

quite pessimistic and they come up with these comedic parodies to poke fun at the idea of reparation.

Anjna Chouhan:

Are these parodies also films, or are they also in the form of theatre?

Alexa Alice Joubin:

In theatre as well, but mostly in films and it's films about theatre making. So it's so specific. I'll give you an example. This Hong Kong comedy film called *One Husband Too Many*. It's director Anthony Chang came out in 1988. The canonical status of Shakespeare had led to admiration and deference. But this film is among witty parodies of Shakespeare, especially the tragedies since the 1980s. So basically *One Husband Too Many* dramatises, its characters' mere quixotic insistence, and performing and rehearsing *Romeo and Juliet* to ameliorate their condition. So the lead, he pings all his hope on bringing *Romeo and Juliet* and "Western culture" to a backwater village in Hong Kong by staging his version of the play.

But with the costumes and the soundtrack borrowed from Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 film. So it parodies both the idea that Shakespeare can be reparative and this 1968 film. And he takes out the role of Romeo, his wife in the movie plays Juliet, and they are interrupted by a rowdy audience who doesn't appreciate the antiques. They don't understand. For example, if the goblet and host style, they find it ridiculous, it's repulsing and indeed the performance is not top-notch. They even have the same soundtrack of Zeffirelli interspersed with audiences asking each other, 'what is Romeo doing? Maybe he needs to pee, one chimed in. The pants are so tight.' And so it shows this discrepancy, this gap, the actors, they feel good about themselves. They finally produced a replica of Zeffirelli onstage for the audiences they're just completely disconnected. I think that the film is a good example of how clever filmmakers are. They are poking fun at the idea of British amelioration, perhaps, right? -the British era; but at the same time, it also betrays a certain kind of anxiety about the imminent return of Hong Kong to China. This found came up just a decade before that historical landmark. It speaks to the crossroads Hong Kong finds itself in. There are a lot of films like this you'd be surprised.

Anjna Chouhan:

Alexa, where can our audiences find if not the entire films, but clips of these films that you refer to, including *One Husband Too Many*?

Alexa Alice Joubin:

Yes, you're all invited to visit the MIT Global Shakespeares. And the address is global Shakespeares.org and they can see various clips. You can search by play. You can search by language, search by genre.

Anjna Chouhan:

That's super Alexa. Thank you. We're just going to take a short break.

Paul Edmondson:

If you've been enjoying *Shakespeare Alive*, please remember to rate and review us on Apple Podcasts or on your usual podcast platform. And if you'd like to suggest guests for us to interview in our next series, please complete our survey by visiting [shakespeares.org.uk/future](https://shakespeares.org.uk/future). You can also connect with us on Twitter and Facebook. Just remember to use a #ShakespeareAlive.

Anjna Chouhan:

You're listening to *Shakespeare Alive* with me, Anjna and I'm talking to Alexa Alice Joubin. I was poking around in some of the things that you've written and I came across your reference to *Chicken Rice Wars*. So *Chicken Rice Wars* is a Singaporean film. Can you tell our listeners about that?

Alexa Alice Joubin:

Absolutely. This is one of my favorites: chicken rice, also known as Hainanese chicken. It's actually the so-called national dish. So this film is built around the conceit of a college production of *Romeo and Juliet*. And the film features multiple languages. So there's Singaporean English or West English. There's Cantonese, bit of Mandarin, as well as Malaysian and the multilingualism is the dramatic device and a political metaphor. The elder generation that the parents, they converse mostly in Cantonese, but the younger generation, the college students, they speak mostly Singlish, basically Singaporean English with a local twist. And Fenson and Audrey are our lead actors in college. They speak in a mix of English and Cantonese while they perform the balcony scene.

Romeo and Juliet meet after the masked ball, they're off stage parents, they're attending a performance where they become more and more impatient with a public display of affection. They do not understand play making versus play going. So to kind of invade into the play-making space. Singapore propaganda emphasises commercial cosmopolitanism and transnational histories of immigration in the service of economic growth. And *Chicken*

*Rice War* critiques the idea that sounding quite, speaking standard English, speaking Shakespeare in English, conveys more authority.

And so as such is such a wonderful film to give us a new lens and to race and ethnicity in a global context, because race is not only visible. This actor is Eurasian for example, in the film versus local Asian actors and race is visible in that sense. But race is also importantly audible in this multilingual film. You always hear race and the film teaches us to pay attention to where our own listening habits are. We like the characters, we are more used to, maybe we pay attention to the accent that we used to. And then we tune out the accent that we don't think that that is correct, or it's something that we're not used to. So that's really important how the film shows the process of listening to race.

Anjna Chouhan:

So it's interesting hearing you talk Alexa, about the crossover of the languages and the nuance of the actual, not just the language itself that these characters are speaking and how that becomes racialised or evokes various histories on contextual histories of how language evolves. But you mentioned earlier about accents as well. So all of these things create a much more complex historical continuous, more organic narrative of how languages as well as cultures start to meld up a marry and become conflated with Shakespeare as part of it.

Alexa Alice Joubin:

Yes, I think new accents are created both for Shakespeare and for the local productions. It's sort of a melting pot, but with a purpose. There's another example is the prolific Singaporean director named Ong Keng Sen O-N-G is his last name. Ong is a prolific theatre director who has been, well-known sort of the equivalent to Tim Supple in the UK. He always uses a multinational and multi-lingual cast who specialise in different theatre styles. So it's not just languages, accents, but also performance styles he will bring together. Most famously in his production *Lear*. And this pan-Asian *Lear* is a platform that he uses to address the internal conflicts - kind of intra-regional - the difficult part of the intra-regional histories, right? Japan's invasion of Singapore, for example. The *Lear*, the father figure in this adaptation speaks Japanese and moves across the stage slowly in a solemn, Noh theatre style. While the elder daughter, I mean, so it's a composite figure of Goneril and Reagan answers his question: 'who am I?' in high pitched Mandarin Chinese, in Chinese Beijing opera style.

So you have a mixture of languages and accents, performance styles to represent a dialogue among different cultures. And that is so creative. It's truly one of a kind and Ong

continues to produce many other works. *Desdemona*, which is inspired by *Othello* and *Hamlet*, actually at the so-called Hamlet castle in Denmark and all of this work - they share the feature of having diasporic actors, speaking different languages, coming together to tell a diverse story. The *Hamlet*, for example, is a site-specific production, meaning that different parts of the action take place in different rooms in the castle. No audience member can see all of the different parts at once. You have to make a choice, you wander from room to room. So each person ends up seeing something different. This is a precedent to the famous *Sleep No More*. This is a site-specific *Macbeth* that started in Manhattan in the hotel. And you wander from room to room, you get bits and pieces of the story of *Macbeth*. But Ong's *Hamlet* I very much appreciate how it opens up a familiar story like *Hamlet* and makes it new and allows the actors from different cultures also have meaningful participation and a dialogue. There are no subtitles. There's no way to make subtitles for such a thing. And it's also interesting how we're kind of on equal footing because no one has an advantage, you can't possibly understand all the languages. Adaptations like this. There's just so rich. And there's so many things and kind of takes us out of the fetishisation of Shakespeare's all about his language.

I think Shakespeare isn't about his narrative patterns, it's about the big ideas. It's about characterization. So it's not just words actually like Hamlet would say words, words, words. Yes, indeed very important but I think there's much more to it. If you talk about the Canon in performative terms. So that's what we learned through productions like this. I think what's fascinating is we can apply this lesson, object lesson if you will, back on English language performances of Shakespeare.

Do the actors mean what they say? Do they know what they mean? It's not about saying those words where it's empty. They have to embody it. I mean, in English language performances, using shapes this text, there's a lot of work to be done. It's not merely saying the words. And of course, audiences, there's huge gap between modern English and early modern English. So audiences do not have the luxury of footnotes, what comes out in some text on the fly...

So you really have to make the words mean on stage. 'To be or not to be' in specific productions, they actually bring out different aspects of it. You have to make choices. It's for a production to be coherent. They've already made a decision, this one specific interpretation. So I believe that that is something that we need to keep in mind as we engage with English language performances and films as well. So that the translational aspect is not unique to global or international Shakespeare, but modern performances or any classical texts.

And most audiences can probably vouch for this. You know it when a performance is good as in engaging. You may not be able to name what it is. But my research indicates what it is is the embodiment, is the success in meaning what they say rather than kind of just reciting and giving you the familiar, You come to Hamlet, are you waiting for 'to be or not to be?' And you heard it - a great evening! It doesn't quite work that way. Nothing is automatic. I think that's the lesson. That's the object lesson, the lesson from global Shakespeare. It's not that global performances are antithetical to English performances.

Anjna Chouhan:

For our audiences who might be completely new to all of these films and theater that you're talking about across East Asian cultures and languages. What can they do to find out more?

Alexa Alice Joubin:

The first place to start by would be the MIT Global Shakespeare's website that I have co-founded. The second thing to do is to start with something familiar, perhaps Akira Kurosawa's award-winning films. He's one of the most important Japanese and international directors, such as *Ran*, meaning chaos. It's based on *King Lear*. And throne of blood, which is extraordinary somewhere and from based on *Macbeth*. Not many people know that the narrative structure of Akira Kurosawa actually inspired Stephen Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, and George Lucas. So for pop culture fans out there rewatch *Star Wars* with Kurosawa. You realise *Star Wars* would not have been possible without Kurosawa, particularly his Shakespeare.

This is moving away from film and moving our audiences away from film and back to the realm of theater. Because I always think that there's something incredibly aesthetically unique about the Kurosawa films. And it made me think about the theatre of Ninagawa the Japanese director. And so in terms of Japanese interpretations of Shakespeare but on English soil itself, I think there's something else going on there, isn't there?

Alexa Alice Joubin:

Oh, absolutely. Ninagawa on is one of the rare, rare - he directed in English, didn't he? In the UK and before he passed away, he visited the UK every single year. And out of these productions can no longer be characterised as touring productions from Japan. He practically spent half of his time there. I dedicated an entire chapter of my book, *Shakespeare and East Asia* to this phenomenon. That is truly the 21st century

global Shakespeare is not made in one place imported to another it's made in this space in between.

Anjna Chouhan:

I wonder what your vision is or what do you predict for this crossover between Shakespeare and East Asian cultures and languages as we move forward throughout the 21st century?

Alexa Alice Joubin:

I believe the force is strong. More fascinating adaptations will emerge not necessarily from Asia, but I think this cross-inspiration cross-fertilisation would only accelerate with a new face of globalisation that is digitally driven. COVID has stopped travels, has closed international borders, but it hasn't stopped artistic inspiration. In fact, it's quite the opposite. We aspire to transcend; and the classics like Shakespeare have the power to bring us to a different space. So that's why people are watching more digital videos or listening to a podcast like this. And so I think this indicates - presages an energetic future for this kind of cross-cultural borrowings.

Anjna Chouhan:

Now as you know, we collect all kinds of things at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust from documents to books to objects. Is there anything within our collection that stands out to you?

Alexa Alice Joubin:

So there's this video of a stage production I'm dying to see: Peter Brook's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Minimalist or by stage is the one that transformed our understanding and their performance religion to make some mentoring. So that's what really stood out to me.

Anjna Chouhan:

My goodness, what a great choice. Thank you. I think you're the only person so far, that's selected a film from the collection. Very creative. And as you know, our final question is about what we ought to be collecting, to represent Shakespeare in the 21st century for future generations to enjoy.

Alexa Alice Joubin:

Again, I'm a video centric person. So I'm going to recommend films and videos, particularly rare ones like Brook's *Midsummer Nights*. If I could, I would request *Chicken Rice War* to

Strafford. Again it was released. It's actually not on DVD. It's on VCD, which is alternate format - video CD basically. And even then, it's very difficult to find now it. This officially exist on video, but it's about to fade from history. What a shame.

Anjna Chouhan:

It is a great shame. And I personally, have only ever seen clips of *Chicken Rice War*. So I would love for us to have a copy of that so that lots of people can access it. That is an absolutely superb recommendation, Alexa. Thank you so much for all of your insight and wisdom today and for sharing all of your knowledge and expertise with our listeners. Can we wish you all the very best for all of your research and study and explorations with Shakespeare and indeed all of your other subjects going forward. And thank you so much for joining us on Shakespeare Alive.

Paul Edmondson:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Shakespeare Alive with Anjna. Join me next week, when I speak to Michael Whitmore director of the Folgers Shakespeare Library, Washington DC. If you'd like to find out more about the houses, collections, research and education activity of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, head over to our website, [shakespeare.org.uk](http://shakespeare.org.uk), where you can also make a donation to help us fulfill our mission to share Shakespeare's legacy with the world.

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