

# The Mercurian



*A Theatrical Translation Review*  
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*The Mercurian* is named for Mercury who, if he had known it, was/is the patron god of theatrical translators, those intrepid souls possessed of eloquence, feats of skill, messengers not between the gods but between cultures, traders in images, nimble and dexterous linguistic thieves. Like the metal mercury, theatrical translators are capable of absorbing other metals, forming amalgams. As in ancient chemistry, the mercurian is one of the five elementary “principles” of which all material substances are compounded, otherwise known as “spirit.” The theatrical translator is sprightly, lively, potentially volatile, sometimes inconstant, witty, an ideal guide or conductor on the road.

*The Mercurian* publishes translations of plays and performance pieces from any language into English. *The Mercurian* also welcomes theoretical pieces about theatrical translation, rants, manifestos, and position papers pertaining to translation for the theatre, as well as production histories of theatrical translations. Submissions should be sent to: Adam Versényi at [anversen@email.unc.edu](mailto:anversen@email.unc.edu) or by snail mail:

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

Astutely charting shared and unique patterns in post-1950s East Asian adaptations and interpretations of Shakespeare across a range of contexts, genres and media—theatrical and cinematic—Alexa Alice Joubin eschews the prevailing (and potentially harmful) approach to “Global Shakespeare” that anchors performances in their perceived cultural roots and values them more for their political rather than their aesthetic qualities. Joubin also pushes back against the utilization of “Asian Shakespeares” for the purposes of diversifying scholarship and curricula in the Anglo-American academy, as well as the exoticization of these adaptations, in particular, the tendency to over-emphasize how much they deviate from Anglophone practices. Both trends, she argues, have resulted in critical blind-spots in our understanding of the meaning and significance of “Asian Shakespeares,” and the overlooking of the multifarious structural and thematic connections between productions from diverse locales. In response, Joubin boldly deterritorializes stage and film versions of Shakespeare, situating them in a postnational space of exchange and focuses on their aesthetic and social (as opposed to political) functions. This is a radical and refreshing move, and Joubin casts new light on familiar, now-canonical works such as Akira Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* (1957), Yukio Ninagawa’s *Macbeth* (1980) and Feng Xiaogang’s *The Banquet* (2006) through placing them in dialogue with Western favorites like Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet* (2000) and examining them in respect to style and technique, the concept of polyphony, gender and cross-gender identities and other Asian and global concerns.


Organizing her cutting-edge book thematically—rather than chronologically or geopolitically—Joubin identifies four themes in particular that distinguish East Asian Shakespeares in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: 1) formalistic innovations in sound and spectacle, 2) the remedial uses of Shakespeare’s plays, 3) conflicting and polity-driven production and reception and 4) multilingualism in diasporic adaptations. These four themes, she argues, produce a series of “concentric circles of analysis” that move from form to ideology, local to global contexts, and from production to reception. Thus, she offers a multitude of approaches of Shakespeare in China, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea and Hong Kong and encourages readers—set free from the limitations of realpolitik and national traditions—to explore connections between works across different temporal-spatial boundaries and modes of representation. There is something truly liberating about this fluid and holistic approach, an approach that “lead us away from an overdetermined concept of the canon” (21). Highlights of the book include Joubin’s discussion of Shakespeare’s (limited) reparative function in East Asia and East Asia’s reparative role in Anglophone Shakespeares (chapter 2); her examination of feminism, gender identities and cross-gender performance practices in East Asian adaptations of *Hamlet* and *King Lear* (chapter 3); and her survey of intercultural and polyphonic productions created for the global festival circuit that refuse to fit into the postcolonial model (chapter 4).

On the downside, and through absolutely no fault of Joubin, most of the writers and directors featured in *Shakespeare in East Asia* are male, which, as she says herself in a thoughtful *caveat lector*, “has long been a function of the setup of Asian theatre and film industries, particularly when it comes to adaptations of Shakespeare” (19). The inequality is especially striking in the theatre industry, though there are some prominent female artists, such as the avant-garde Japanese playwright Kishida Rio,

who collaborated with Ong Keng-sen on both *Lear* (1997) and *Desdemona* (2000), and the Chinese American Tisa Chang, director of a bilingual Mandarin-English *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1983). Wherever possible, Joubin makes a concerted effort to draw attention to these and other women and gender minorities, such as Komaki Kurihara's iconic turn as Lady Macbeth (Lady Asaji) in Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (chapter 1) and Lee Joon-gi's embodiment of Gong-gil, a transgender Ophelia character in the film *The King and the Clown* (2005)(chapter 3). She also includes discussion of ethnic minorities within East Asia (every region has its order, complete with its center and margins, after all) as well as offers a critique of class privilege and other forms of social inequality. One of the many other strengths of *Shakespeare in East Asia* is its reflections on the politics of multilingualism, the diasporic condition and intercultural performance which, Joubin suggests, serves important sociocultural and aesthetic functions. In particular, instead of viewing such (usually touring) productions as pandering to Western fantasies of an exotic East or as reflecting colonial/postcolonial power configurations, Joubin posits that intercultural productions such as Ong Keng Sen and David Tse Ka-shing's acclaimed versions of *King Lear* (1997 and 2006, respectively) produce an alienating effect that "help[s] us move from narratives driven by political geographies to histories informed by theatrical localities—the varied locations embodied by touring performances" (134-35).

In this respect and others, Alexa Alice Joubin's book ushers in and lays the theoretical groundwork for the next phase of scholarship on "Asian Shakespeares," a subject area she has spearheaded since the publication of her now-seminal monograph, *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange* (Columbia University Press, 2009). And even though many of the films and stage adaptations she explores have (to varying degrees) received critical attention elsewhere, her critical approach and methodology is innovative and exciting and, moreover, offers others in the field directives for future research. The glossary, detailed suggestions for further reading, and annotated chronology of Shakespeare and East Asia will definitely be tremendously useful to scholars in this specialist yet burgeoning field of study, a field that, like the theatre and film artists Joubin focuses on, challenges fixed notions of tradition and narrow definitions of cultural authenticity. As the author puts it herself, "Asian Shakespeares" are much more than "curiosities or colonial remnants," but matter to Western readers because of their impact on American and European performance cultures and their significance to global culture studies (6).

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Welcome to the Fall 2021 issue of *The Mercurian*! While vaccination and other medical, social, and political responses to the global pandemic have enabled some parts of the world to emerge from lockdowns and return to live performances, there remains great disparity in vaccination rates between and within countries making travel and many forms of cultural exchange difficult, if not impossible. In such a context theatrical translation can give us a sense of varied theatrical cultures and I hope that the five plays and one book review in this issue provide a means of exploring different traditions in parts of the world distinct from your own.

The issue begins with Amanda T. Perry's translation of Cuban playwright Antón Arrufat's play *Seven Against Thebes*. As Perry describes in her introduction, while the play won the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC) Theatre Prize in 1968, it became the subject of heated controversy when two jurors voted against it on political grounds and UNEAC published the play with a preface condemning its contents. Arrufat was effectively banned from publishing throughout the next decade in Cuba. He published prose and poetry in the 1980s and 1990s, but largely abandon the theatre. In 2000 he won Cuba's National Prize for Literature. In 2001 *Seven Against Thebes* was republished and subsequently staged in a revised form in 2007. Perry's translation is of the 1968 version and is contextualized for us here by additional material including translations of the UNEAC preface and Leopoldo Ávila's article, "Antón Goes to War."

Next comes Jozefína Komporalý's translation of a stage adaptation of Romanian playwright Matéi Visniec's *Decomposed Theatre*. Going into self-imposed exile in France in 1987, where he works as a journalist for Radio France Internationale, Visniec moved from writing his plays in Romanian to writing in French. Komporalý has based her translation on a French and Romanian version of the play produced in 1993, as well as relying heavily on Visniec's subsequent Romanian version of the play. Visniec calls *Decomposed Theatre* a "modular text" and encourages theatre companies to perform its collection of independent scenes in a wide variety of permutations. The version published here was performed by Trap Door Theatre via Zoom in eight episodes between December 2020 and February 2021. Readers will thus encounter a play not only translated from two different languages with an endlessly flexible structure, but also one specifically conceived of for virtual performance. Each of these aspects of *Decomposed Theatre* presents its own translation challenges.

*Decomposed Theatre* is followed by Sharon G. Feldman's translation of Catalan playwright Gemma Brió Zamora's play *Liberto*. A well-known stage and television actor in both Catalan and Spanish, this is Brió Zamora's first play and is based upon her own personal experience of loss and struggling with the ethics of euthanasia. Loss, grief, and resilience have been so much a part of all our lives in the past year and a half, and I hope that Brió Zamora's play, with its formal mixture of monologues, dialogues, and video sequences, helps assuage some of the pain we have encountered.

Next comes Fatemeh Madani Sarbarani's translation of Iranian playwright Hossein Kiani's play *Tomb Dwellers* from 2009. The play was first staged after the hotly contested presidential election that brought Mahmoud Admadinejad into power for a second term. As Sarbarani describes in her introduction, mounting a production of the play involved creative manipulation of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance's censorship. As a result, the play's sharp critique of Iranian authority becomes oblique and allegorical, yet fully comprehensible to its intended audience. Readers can judge for themselves how much of this approach translates for them.

The last translation in this issue is David McKay's translation of Belgian playwright Freek Marién's play *The*

*Wetsuitman* that premiered in Dutch in Antwerp, Belgium in 2019. A fictionalized rendition of true stories and historical events, *The Wetsuitman* was inspired by a newspaper article about two refugees who tried to swim from Calais to England, only to be washed ashore in Norway and the Netherlands. Along with several of the other translations in this issue, Marién's play breaks formal structural conventions, merging characters and timelines and can be performed by anywhere from three to twenty-eight performers. McKay's translation of *The Wetsuitman* is slated for two productions in 2022, one at London's Foreign Affairs and the other at the Cherry Arts in Ithaca, NY where Samuel Buggeln, whose translations of Rafael Spregelburd, Marivaux, and Molière's plays have appeared in previous issues of *The Mercurian*, is Artistic Director.

The issue ends with Adele Lee's review of Alexa Alice Joubin's book *Shakespeare in East Asia*. Joubin's book analyzes a number of East Asian stage and film adaptations of Shakespeare. *The Mercurian* has always taken a "big tent" approach to covering theatrical translation, and Joubin's book offers those who wish to approach Shakespeare through a non-Anglophone lens a window into East Asian performances of Shakespeare in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Back issues of *The Mercurian* can be found at under the "Archives" tab on our website: <https://the-mercurian.com/>. As the theatre is nothing without its audience, *The Mercurian* welcomes your comments, questions, complaints, and critiques. Deadline for submissions for consideration for Volume 9, No. 1 Spring 2022 will be February 1, 2022.

—Adam Versényi

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