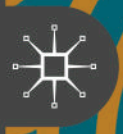

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Digital Shakespeares from the Global South

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CHAPTER 6

Shakespeare as a Digital Nomad: An Afterword

Alexa Alice Joubin

Abstract The rise of global Shakespeare as an industry and cultural practice—the incorporation of Shakespearean performance in cultural diplomacy and in the cultural marketplace—is aided by digital tools of dissemination and digital forms of artistic expression. Shakespeare has evolved from a cultural nomad in the past centuries—a body of works with no permanent artistic home base—to a digital nomad in the twenty-first century—an artist whose livelihood depends on commissions online and who works from any number of physical locations. The digital sphere is now the most important habitation for global Shakespeare, especially in the era of the pandemic of Covid-19. A nomad may not have a place to call home, but they can also lay claim to any cultural location.

Keywords Nomad · Interface · Digital humanities · Liveness in performance · Covid-19

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In a scene in Armenian-Iranian director Varuzh Karim-Masihi's film *Tardid* (*Doubt*, 2009), an archivist named Siavash is hanging a framed Farsi text, "to be or not to be," on the wall of a dimly lit basement in modern-day Tehran. He proceeds to contemplate the parallels between his life and Hamlet. The Danish prince's speech becomes a tangible artifact in this scene. The framed text on the wall is part of the technologies of representation that are rendering Hamlet's and Siavash's musings in a palpable form of writing. The *mise-en-scène*, with Siavash stating early on that "I've never been very good at making decisions," interfaces Hamlet's soliloquy and Siavash's sensation of being trapped in an interstitial space. In fact, *Hamlet* is more than background noise in *Tardid*; it is a key meta-theatrical device in the film. While investigating the cause of his father's mysterious death, Siavash turns regularly to *Hamlet* for moral guidance. In a particularly rich meta-theatrical moment in the film, Siavash stages a performance of *Hamlet* at the wedding of his mother and uncle to "catch the conscience of the king." Named after the Iranian mythical figure, a symbol of innocence and chastity, the Siyâvash figure, the film's protagonist, carries echoes of both Shakespeare's tragedy, in which Hamlet seeks inner truths, and Ferdowsi's tenth-century Persian epic *Shahnameh* (*The Book of Kings*), in which Siyâvash is compelled to prove his innocence after rejecting advances from his lustful stepmother.

Filmmaking in the Global South

This film, little known outside Iran[1] despite its prestigious award,[2] captures several issues raised by the chapters in the present volume, including uneven archival knowledge about and access to the Global South, new ways of interfacing Shakespeare, and Marvin Carlson's theory that performances are always being haunted by technologies of representation and previous iterations of the characters.[3] Old Hamlet's ghost, for instance, appears in a late scene in the film through a mediating mechanism. He communicates with Siavash through a Sufi healer, or an

[1] There are only three major peer-reviewed studies of the film: Burnett, *"Hamlet" and World Cinema*, 188–218; O'Brien, "Shakespeare in Iran," *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Global Shakespeare*, 1–14; and Owlia, "The New Woman and the Oriental Tropes as Portrayed in *Tardid*," 107–118.

[2] Crystal Simorgh award for best film, 27th Fajr International Film Festival, 2009.

[3] Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*.

intermediary known as *dervish* in southern Iran. While participating in an indigenous Zar spiritual cleansing ritual of dance, Siavash encounters his father's spirit who forcefully inhabits the body of a dancing *dervish*. Interestingly, by the time of this encounter, Siavash is already suspicious of his uncle and has carried out his own investigation. In contrast to Shakespeare's tragedy, the ghost appears quite late in the film and does not give Siavash a revenge mission; his appearance merely completes the puzzle in *Tardid*.

Adaptations do not always have one singular home base. Depending on audiences' film viewing habits and cultural background, they may see, in *Tardid*, traces of life in contemporary Iran, early modern English anxieties about succession, a medieval Danish legend as imagined by Shakespeare, or a combination of all three. *Tardid*'s "minor" style, to use Gilles Deleuze's words, counteracts universalist narrative patterns popularized by Western cinema. By virtue of *Tardid*'s being a Global South film, the characters' "private business is immediately political."[4] A large number of Global South adaptations of Shakespeare, whether aided by digital means of dissemination or not, are constrained in such "minor" spaces of self/representation.

Shakespeare as a Digital Nomad

Thanks to the canonical status of Shakespeare's works, performances of Shakespeare circulate widely, though not always freely, across the globe, giving Shakespeare a global afterlife. However, in what sense is Shakespeare global? Being everything to everyone in every location? Having an equally impactful or accessible presence on every continent? Since *Tardid* does not circulate globally, is it still part of global Shakespeare?

The rise of global Shakespeare as an industry and cultural practice—the incorporation of Shakespearean performance in cultural diplomacy and in the cultural marketplace—is aided by digital tools of dissemination and digital forms of artistic expression. Shakespeare has evolved from a cultural nomad in the past centuries—a body of works with no permanent artistic home base—to a digital nomad in the twenty-first century—an artist whose livelihood depends on commissions online and who works from any number of physical locations. The digital sphere is now the

[4] Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 220.

most important habitation for global Shakespeare, especially in the era of the pandemic of Covid-19. A nomad may not have a place to call home, but they can also lay claim to any cultural location. *Tardid* is shot in the urban landscape of Tehran with copious references of and allusions to other temporalities and cultural locations, such as life in contemporary Tehran, a tenth-century Persian epic, southern Iranian religious ritual, and early modern English interpretations of a medieval legend.

In her Introduction to this volume, Amrita Sen asks "whose digital Shakespeare is it anyway?" while pointing to the increasingly urgent digital divide across the globe. The standard disclaimer that "your mileage may vary" in terms of experiencing digital performances of Shakespeare does not quite answer these urgent questions about diversity, equity, and inclusion. A digital performance video produced in London but consumed in Tehran, for instance, carries with it culturally specific meanings of these locations. These meanings are filtered and enabled by the screen as interface. Means of access to digital contents also vary greatly between locations due to censorship, uneven valuation of cultural production, and infrastructural inconsistencies.

Contributors to the present volume have more than adequately examined the fraught relations between digital Shakespeare and the Global South. To complement these chapters, in this Afterword, I would like to consider the theoretical ramifications of the idea of Shakespeare as a digital nomad in the era of Covid-19 in the following two areas: the politics of interfacing Shakespeare onscreen and evolving digital archival practices.

The Screening Interface

Shakespearean performance has always been mediated by technologies of representation, both analogue and digital. Screened performance as a narrative medium is governed by the interface between human story-tellers and technologies of representation. Accelerated by the Covid-induced public health measure of social distancing, the past years have witnessed a convergence of what were once distinct media verticals such as film, television, theater, livestream, and other immersive or interactive media forms. Live theater used to be a synchronous communal affair taking place in an architectural space, while performances on private screens were asynchronous, intimate, and individuated. Further, "live" performances used to be distinguished from film—a more editorialized medium—by their cachet of being "ephemeral" and irrecoverable. Now

that more and more theatrical and filmic performances are mediated by the same screen interface, these distinctions are going away. Over time, with improvements in communication networks, these changes would redefine the Global South and the Global North.

Just as "the liberation of writing from the book in digital culture" has "changed the ways we make writing perform,"[5] the interface of the screen gives the concept of performance synchronous and asynchronous meanings. The pandemic of COVID-19 has blurred the distinctions between feature films intended for the multiplex and made-for-television, or made-for-streaming, films in terms of funding structures, aspect ratios, and scope of production. These new dynamics extend from multiplex screens to the small screens of laptops, television, tablets, home cinemas, smart phone, and other personalized interfaces.

The interfaces and the channels of distribution are merging quickly. Netflix, a purveyor of streaming products, is now a global producer of original contents in the forms of both films and television series. These products are intended for streaming rather than collective consumption in multiplexes. Amazon, having acquired the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer movie company in 2021, is also capitalizing on its Prime Video streaming platform. Amazon Studios have already (co)produced a hundred original films, including Richard Eyre's 2018 *King Lear*, starring Anthony Hopkins in the lead role and streamed as part of Amazon Prime.

In the golden era of Shakespeare on television (1944–1971), most TV versions were based on successful stage performances. In contrast, in our times, there is no longer a hierarchical order of page-to-stage-to-television-to-film. This is due to the lockdown as a public health measure during the pandemic and due to the prevalence of streaming technologies already in place before 2020. Before the pandemic, more and more stage productions had been broadcast live, or in recorded formats, such as the Royal Shakespeare Theatre's RSC-Live series, to audiences in theaters. Now, an even larger number of born-digital, or re-mastered, performances reached audiences directly on the small screen. It is no longer as meaningful to distinguish between "live" productions, multiplex films, and made-for-small-screen films.

It is now commonplace to integrate Shakespeare in traditional film formats on the big screen into personalized experiences on the small

[5] Worthen, "Posthuman Shakespeare performance studies," 215–222; 217.

screen for personal entertainment or for education. Competing digital interfaces, as Thomas Cartelli observes, "reduce the objective of feature film presentation in fixed screening spaces to one among many reception/display options."[6] One challenge for the study of digital Shakespeare now is that the interface often makes itself transparent even though it is generating the dramaturgical meanings central to the narratives. The screen interface immerses audiences in an alternate universe in such a way that audiences rarely question the screen's aesthetic function.

COVID-19 accelerated the global processes of interfacing Shakespeare onscreen. Theater director Erin B. Mee writes optimistically that the pandemic has created "an exciting new performance environment," bringing artists and audiences together "from numerous nations" and creating "new possibilities for collaboration." Digital forms of video communication have enabled "artists from around the world" to gather in virtual spaces "playing to international audiences rather than … to people who can get to a particular piece of real estate" in time.[7]

The global pandemic has further expanded the idea of liveness. The new genre of born-digital performances has redefined the notion of liveness as merely "a temporal and spatial entity."[8] Attending a live event no longer entails being physically in the same space at the same time, breathing the same air (and, after 2020, thereby sharing the same virus). Liveness has evolved to become a synchronous concept. As Philip Auslander critiqued in 2008, more than a decade before the pandemic-fueled rise of performances on such video conferencing platforms as Zoom, the now antiquated idea of liveness reduces "live performance and its present mediatized environment" to a "binary opposition of the live and the mediatized" in which the live event is "real" and that mediatized events are "secondary and somehow artificial reproductions of the real."[9]

As the ideological structures governing liveness and artistic prestige change, so do the possibilities of art making. Asynchronous digital videos in the form of archival streams do not so much replicate

[6] Cartelli, *Reenacting Shakespeare in the Shakespeare Aftermath: The Intermedial Turn and Turn to Embodiment*, 48.

[7] Mee and TDR Editors, "Forum: After COVID-19, What?" 191–224; 208–209.

[8] Sullivan, "The Audience is Present: Aliveness, Social Media and the Theatre Broadcast Experience," 59–75.

[9] Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 3.

theatrical experiences as they enable experiential and affective immersiveness on personal electronic devices for private consumption. Blurring the boundary between film and theater, both genres are detached from the palpable bodily presence of actors. Notably, viewers' own subjectivity becomes disembodied just as that of the actors, but in the process they build a community through "virtual co-presence."[10]

Three observations can be made about these instances of interfacing Shakespeare onscreen. First, the screen as interface has created deep structural connections among even works that seem to be isolated instances of artistic creation. The connections extend through the cultural practice of interfacing different media, such as film, theater, and visual arts. The cases above relate more frequently to one another, through the screening interface, than to Shakespeare as sanctified source material.

Secondly, more and more works are products of meta-cinematic and meta-theatrical operations. The meanings of adaptations such as *Tardid* are shaped by their uses of Shakespearean motifs and quotes (such as "to be or not to be") as interface. The archetype of Hamlet is deployed to capture the figure of the despondent in distinctively local contexts.

Thirdly, the interface culture has given rise to digitally enhanced global Shakespeare performances. The "to be or not to be" speech is familiar enough to serve as an interface between a character's suffering and an index of intelligence, such as Siavash in *Tardid*. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of networks of instantaneous cross references as well as localized, embodied knowledge about Shakespeare. The interface-driven screen culture has de-centered Shakespeare's singularity—the perceived infinite value of the canon—by turning Shakespearean artifacts into a heterotopia. In time, this interface may deconstruct the division between the Global North and the Global South.

Archival Silence

At stake in global artistic exchanges are not only politics of access and visibility but also variegated, distributed, and user data-driven archives that act as gatekeepers and artistic agents. It is through archives that stage and screen performances of Shakespeare become "teachable" moments and

[10] Aebischer, *Viral Shakespeare Performance in the Time of Pandemic*, 11.

subjects for scholarly research. Over the past decade, digital artifacts—digital performance videos, user-generated tag clouds and comments, Twitter feeds—have become multimodal, common objects of study for researchers, educators, and students, changing scholarly communication practices in disseminating research findings and the praxis of humanistic inquiry.[11] This development has profound implications for the study of arts in the Global South in terms of the uneven power structure and access issues, though we may only see the results in the next decade.

There are, of course, caveats beyond digital ephemerality. As much as archives may preserve traces of the past, they are also "sites of loss, effacement and forgetting, where some voices are silent and silenced."[12] Open-access digital archives of performances may democratize access and even enhance content creation, but they may not be able to feature voices from the Global North and the Global South in equal measures in playable media.

Take, for instance, the *MIT Global Shakespeares* (https://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/) that I co-founded with Peter S. Donaldson. Aiming to provide vetted, crowd-sourced performance videos that are open-access with permalinks, the open-access digital performance video archive offers 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. Deeply collaborative in nature with 9 regional editors and 4 affiliated projects, the MIT platform publishes vetted video, metadata, and peer-reviewed analyses of performances. The project has spotlighted artistic and academic works by people of color, created undergraduate and doctoral internships and research positions in digital publishing, and enabled students, artists, and researchers to access primary research materials freely.

Despite our effort, there are gaps. In terms of South American representation, we have curated a large number of Brazilian productions, with Argentinian works coming in second. The coverage map of sub-Saharan African continent is largely blank, except for co-productions or works that have toured to South Africa, such as Antony Sher and John Kani's *King*

[11] Joubin, "Global Shakespeare 2.0 and the Task of the Performance Archive," 38–51.

[12] Hodder, "On Absence and Abundance: Biography as Method in Archival Research," 452–439; 452.

Lear-inspired two-people show, *Kunene and the King* (Royal Shakespeare Company and Cape Town's Fugard Theatre, 2019).

If global Shakespeare seems to be all over the map or missing from some maps altogether, it is because, first, many productions do not have a single point of cultural origin, and second, our collective knowledge about the Global South is contingent upon cultural and political forces. There is archival silence that results from censorship as well as scholars' over reliance on polity-driven historiography—narratives about art that focus on national political histories rather than cultural exchange beyond the borders of nation-states. Maps are often used as markers of geopolitical power, which is why we have detailed histories of national Shakespeares in the Anglophone world and more traditional postcolonial contexts, but relevantly few accounts of non-mainstream works from the Global South, such as *Tardid*.

Mental maps of the world that are informed by area studies models inadvertently create unknowable objects by flattening the artworks against national profiles. As visually appealing as the map is as a navigational and heuristic tool, its clean lines between nations obscure the fact that many productions do not have one single home. As such, such a map does not seem to promote an appreciation of transnational cultural flows or the fact that while Lotfi Achour's *Macbeth: Leila and Ben, a Bloody History* hailed from Tunisia, the Franco-Arabic company APA's production—with a French translation of Heiner Müller's German translation—resisted a unified identity. It incorporated traditions of the European experimental theater, the Arab Middle East, and Africa.

Attempts to map the itineraries of global Shakespeare reveal that there is a limit to Shakespeare's global reach. The gaps are inevitable when archives are themselves highly selective repository of memories. Further, sensitive or subversive texts can be removed from sight, leading to silenced or redacted stories. The stories an archive tells may be curated, censored, and distorted by native informants and global producers, or otherwise filtered by financial circumstances or ideological preferences. However, what is not there is as important as the canonical performances.

Most archives have not caught up to the fact that Shakespeare is now a digital nomad. There are two implications of silences in the archive. First, silences or gaps in a body of records may reflect certain realities in the world the archive is trying to map. There seem to be no significant Shakespeare traditions in the Antarctic, Iceland, Greenland, Fiji, Tristan da Cunha, Mongolia, Iran, and in large swaths of Sub-Saharan Africa

except for South Africa. Materials from these areas are therefore sparse or missing in the archive. These gaps may well reflect an actual dearth of Shakespearean performances in those places, but the gaps may also be a result of scholars' limited linguistic repertoire or cross-cultural interest.

Second, authorities may deny scholar-archivists full access to sensitive or censored archives for any number of reasons. Censorship not only impedes access to archives but also compromises academic freedom. For example, even when scholars are able to locate politically sensitive materials pertaining to performances of *Hamlet* in post-Arab Spring Egypt, they may not be able to discuss them in public because of concerns for the safety of their collaborators and interviewees who are still living in those countries. They may not be able to publish their findings because they are concerned that they will be banned from entering those countries on future research trips or will not receive funding from those governments.

Archival silence occurs due to censorship and sometimes lack of artists' consent. The gap in our archival knowledge is also caused by Covid-induced, citizenship-based international travel bans or restrictions that hinder mobility and access.[13] The full ramification of Covid-19 on the humanistic inquiry will only be known in the decades to come.

In our study of the Global South, the archival silence constitutes productive negative evidence in the archaeological and anthropological senses. Archival silence compels us to rethink our criteria and frames of reference. On one hand, while postcolonial critics commonly privilege Global South works that critique the role of Western hegemony, the meanings of Shakespeare in such places as South Africa, Brazil, and India are not always determined by colonial frames of reference. On the other hand, as chapters in our book capably show, the absence of a coherent, constructed Shakespeare tradition in certain place does not mean there are no local engagements with Shakespearean material.

It is my hope that, in the not-so-distant future, those of us at the presumptive center of the Shakespeare industry will be hanging on our

[13] Since blanket travel bans are "not effective in suppressing international spread," the WHO has called on governments to stop the practice which "may discourage transparent and rapid reporting of emerging" viral variant of concern. WHO, "Statement on the tenth meeting of the International Health Regulations (2005) Emergency Committee regarding the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic," *WHO News*, January 19, 2022, https://www.who.int/news/item/19-01-2022-statement-on-the-tenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-(2005)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-19)-pandemic.

proverbial walls a framed speech by characters such as Siavash, rather than witnessing more Siavashs carrying on Shakespeare's "dying voice" (*Hamlet* 5.2.308) only to be silenced by the archives.[14]

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