

Dennis Kennedy and Yong Li Lan eds. 2010
Shakespeare in Asia: Contemporary Performance
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Rosa María García-Periago
University of Murcia

As a collection of essays, Dennis Kennedy and Yong Li Lan's *Shakespeare in Asia: Contemporary Performance* (2010) is an innovative and illuminating work, which considerably contributes to our understanding of Shakespeare's *oeuvre* in an Asian cultural aesthetics. In spite of the fact that the outset of the postmillennial period has witnessed an enormous number of volumes devoted to the study of Shakespeare in specific Asian countries such as China, India or Japan (Ruru 2003; Huang 2009; Trivedi and Bartholomeusz 2005; Kishin and Bradshaw 2005; Minami, Carruthers and Gillies 2001), the current volume is actually one of the first works in bringing to the fore productions of the entire continent.¹ Prior to the publication of Kennedy and Lan's volume, Alexander Huang's works had substantially shaped Asian Shakespeare(s) as a new field of study. Though his contributions basically examine the reception of Shakespeare in China, his special issue "Asian Shakespeares" for the journal *Borrowers and Lenders*, devoted exclusively to reviews of two Asian Shakespeare film adaptations – *The Banquet* (dir. Xiaogang Feng, 2006) and *Maqbool* (dir. Vishal Bharadwaj, 2003) – and his co-edited volume with Charles S. Ross (2009) are now mandatory references in the field. While the special issue analyzes the intricacies of two Asian visual texts, the collection of essays edited with Ross goes beyond, and focuses on the current cultural flows linking

¹ Another volume on the topic of Shakespeare in Asia has been published this year (Trivedi and Minami 2010). The approach, though, is consistently different since this takes the shape of an "encyclopedia" of performances of Shakespeare's plays on the Asian stage, covering productions in geographical locations never analysed before.

Hollywood, Asia and the digital age, and how they influence our understanding of Shakespeare. Thus, the scope of Huang and Ross's work is considerable, and it is not limited to the reception of Shakespeare in Asia. Kennedy and Lan's volume *Shakespeare in Asia: Contemporary Performance* offers an approach to the subject that differs significantly from its predecessor in that, rather than being interested in how the new paradigms of global culture affect the way Shakespeare is experienced, it attempts to develop, (re)negotiate, and examine Asian Shakespeares/Shakespeare in Asia as an entity *per se* through the theoretical background of interculturality.

Outside the comfortable "zone" of Anglophone cultures, Kennedy and Lan's work clearly emerges from the increasing interest in the cultural exchanges provided by Shakespearean intercultural performances as successful as Ong Keng Sen's trilogy. One of the book's greatest virtues is its layout since, rather than allotting a chapter to each production, this collection is divided into complex and stimulating sections ("Voice and body;" "Shakespeare in Asian popular cultures;" "Transacting cultures;" "Intercultural politics"), which have the ever-present interculturality as nexus. Each section is sensibly preceded by a succinct introduction, which allows the expert in this field, as well as the novel reader, to follow the argument effortlessly. Contrary to the readers' expectations – if they are familiar with Dennis Kennedy's theatrical background – the book is not simply limited to the interpretation of Shakespeare on the Asian stage. In fact, one of the most valuable assets of the book is the wide range of cultural products it discusses – from the "localized" traditional performances of Shakespeare's plays to Manga comics and Bollywood movies – this volume offers a forum for discussing a diversity of Shakespearean afterlives in several media, including instances of popular culture, which are often neglected in scholarly books.

Instead of providing only a summary of the subsequent essays in the volume, Kennedy and Lan's introduction is informative *per se*, not only for its enriching content, but also for its exemplary economy of style and exciting structure. Asking themselves questions concerning the role of Shakespeare in non-western productions as apparently simple as "what is it that endures when he is deprived of his tongue?" (21) or concerning the active role of the spectators in them, the editors want to examine the possibilities and failures of

these productions which play on a “double marketability,” advertising both the name of Shakespeare and their “Asianness” or exoticism. The editors implicitly suggest that these new modes of representation are opening up a future for Shakespearean plays – where corporeal performance is crucial – which would never have been imagined in the Western tradition. One of the key elements of this introduction is the concise and interesting list that includes the different solutions for the appropriation of the Bard: nationalist appropriation (in China), colonial instigation (India), and intercultural revision, which is innovative, and refers to productions that adapt the text to foreign modes of performance and is not associated with any geographical space. The rest of the introduction basically advances the ensuing discussion concerning the differences between traditional western approaches and the modes of representation, re-negotiation and re-invention of Shakespeare in the Asian countries, where speech/dialogue is not the most important element, and is simply subject to the other strategies for adapting the plays.

The first section of the volume “Voice and body” addresses the issue of speaking Shakespeare in foreign voices from different angles. In his essay about “Shakespeare and the *Natyasastra*,” John Russell Brown states that *Natyasastra* acting methods – based on *rasas* (sensations) – can be useful for English-speaking actors. Daniel Gallimore explores how a text changes and is transformed considerably in the throat of an actor through the medium of *Rodoku* – Japanese methods of verse recitation. Much more interesting from an intercultural perspective is the analysis by Fei Chunfang and Sun Huizhu of the experience of mixing *Othello* with the style of the Beijing Opera for the Chinese theatre in 1983 and for American would-be actors in 1994. Their findings show that while in China it was Shakespeare that was appropriated, in America it was the Chinese Opera. With a clear twist to Rustom Bharucha’s argument according to which all appropriations are doubtful, Chunfang and Huizhu conclude their chapter by highlighting the idea that although appropriations may lose something in the process, refreshing and enlightening new meanings can also be produced.

The second section “Shakespeare in Asian popular cultures” brings together the most exciting essays in the entire book, devoted to the reception and understanding of Shakespeare in Asian popular

modes. In a chapter that includes both old and recent Bollywood movies that refer somehow to Shakespeare's plays such as *Shakespeare Wallah*, 36 *Chowringhee Lane*, 1942: *A Love Story* or the box-office hit *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, Richard Burt traces the marginalization of Shakespeare in Bollywood cinema to the colonial past. Moreover, the chapter also shows how the localizing of Shakespeare in Bollywood movies is in fact crucial to his entrance into the "glocal" marketplace. As the only essay that delves into films, Burt's chapter provides an oasis to the cinema lovers in the book, although the inclusion of films from the late 60s and from the 80s may distort Burt's hypothesis and the reader is sometimes lost, waiting to see the direction the article takes. Burt's chapter is nevertheless an invaluable contribution to the field of Shakespeare in Bollywood, still so little studied. In a well-structured and highly readable chapter, Minami Ryuta engages with the reader in a satisfactory search for Shakespeare in a Shojo Manga – a comic addressed to girls. The strength of the essay resides in the reading of a Shojo Manga *Twelfth Night* as a clear case of hybridity, being indebted to Shakespeare's play as well as to the all-female Takarazuka Company's house style by means of the androgyny of the male impersonators and the cross-dressing plots. The experiment to see how Shakespeare's cachet works with popular cultural products ends with the chapter by Kumiko Hilberdink-Sakamoto about Shakespeare's villains in Japan. Focusing on Noda Hideki and Ryuzanji Jimusho's adaptations of Shakespeare in 1990 and 1992 – written in a crucial period for Japanese theatre, the Shogekijo boom – the author reworks and expands the concept of the villain in Shakespeare's plays. Kumiko Hilberdink-Sakamoto also suggests that Shogekijo adaptations – considerably altered from the original text, and addressed to a female audience – encouraged another kind of "Shakespeare," targeted at contemporary Japanese audiences. Although the three essays included in this section seem unrelated to each other since they are concerned with different aspects of popular culture, the three show how Shakespearean works are considerably altered – sometimes reduced to the mere plots – to address contemporary audiences.

In the third section "Transacting cultures," the three essays revolve around the idea that Shakespeare is regarded as one of the most wanted tools for cultural exchange. Unlike the articles in the previous section, the three essays are closely related. Suematsu

Michiko looks into the presence of Shakespeare in Japan, which has gone through different stages – the import of “authentic” Shakespearean productions aiming to imitate the western model in the first half of the 20th century, closely followed by the export of “authentic exotic Japanese Shakespeares” from the 1970s on. Yet, thanks to the 1990s productions, the simplistic binary formula has now disappeared, paving the way for a wider spectrum of performances that goes beyond the traditional boundaries. In an excellently contextualised chapter, Li Ruru concentrates on three Shakespearean productions in China to show that each director was aware of the necessity of clinging to Shakespeare in order to convey his meaning. Ruru concludes her chapter claiming that “the story of Shakespeare in China is more about China than Shakespeare” (185). If the previous chapters focused on the overview of Shakespeare in Japan and in China respectively, Yong Li Lan explores Ong Keng Sen’s three adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays – *LEAR* (1997, 1999), *Desdemona* (2000), and *Search: Hamlet* (2002) – as true intercultural performances. The bold approaches taken by the productions with different theatrical forms and spaces, multicultural casts and multiple languages to play each character favoured a clear intercultural reading. The linear and binary conception of Shakespeare in Asia is complicated and challenged by this chapter, which in fact regards that notion as old-fashioned and conservative since interculturality is now “the global circulation” (206) due to the continuous flows of people and media. Therefore, this section moves from abstract instances of interculturality to a concrete example in Ong Keng Sen’s adaptations.

The last section of the volume “Intercultural Politics” takes a political angle. The three essays contained in this last part undertake a thorough discussion of the politics and possibilities of interculturality in contemporary Asia. Shen is concerned with an analysis of intercultural practices as right or wrong, whereas John Phillips actually wonders if intercultural performances of Shakespeare are possible. The collection ends with the well-known article by Rustom Bharucha previously published in *Theatre Journal* “Foreign Asia/Foreign Shakespeare,” in which he de-canonizes these two entities. He examines Ong Keng Sen’s productions, postcolonial criticism in relation to native theatrical forms and European-Asian cultural exchange in sceptical terms, as if there was no future for the issue of interculturality, which is left at stalemate.

Although the reasons to end with this chapter are easy to grasp, the book leaves the reader full of *angst*. Seeming to contradict some of the previous arguments, this section, in spite of being entitled “Intercultural Politics,” does not provide the longed for conclusion regarding interculturality, and ends with an open-ended debate in which the reader is invited to participate – just as good intercultural productions move the spectator to play an active role, so does Kennedy and Lan’s collection.

In spite of its title – “Shakespeare in Asia: Contemporary Performance” – this collection does not show a well-balanced geographical coverage, and privileges productions from some geographical areas – basically China and Japan – over performances from other Asian regions which do not even have a nominal presence, such as Malaysia, Indonesia or Korea, or which are scantily mentioned, like India. With the exception of the *Kathakali Othello* analysed briefly by Rustom Bharucha, famous Indian performances in theatrical traditions such as Kaliyattam or Jatra have been completely ignored. The reader may also suffer from a surfeit of certain productions like Ong Keng Sen’s trilogy, which is discussed in several chapters, and may feel an appetite for more contemporary performances. The lack of variety and breadth in the productions discussed is disappointing at times. Another shortcoming of this collection is the contributors’ conflicting views, which tend to end in continuous back-and-forths – Chunfang and Huizhu and Yong Li Lan contradicting Bharucha’s arguments and Bharucha himself harshly criticising John Russell Brown – which rather than enriching the arguments, render the theorizing of interculturality even more difficult than it is.

And yet, no one expects interculturality to be easy to tackle. The considerable number of contributors from different traditions and backgrounds and their lively, on-going scholarly debates are two of the strengths of the book. Fresh, illuminating and well-structured, Kennedy and Lan’s volume is more than a mere welcome and an interesting contribution to the field of Shakespeare in Asia, and, thanks to its added political, theoretical and ideological dimensions, it will become an indispensable reference for future research.

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Author's contact: rosagperiago@um.es