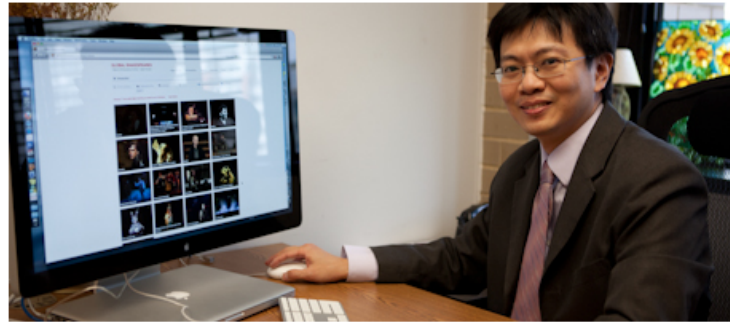


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The Global Influence of Shakespeare

Associate Professor of English Alex Huang co-founded a video archive of worldwide performances inspired by the Bard's works.

Nov. 28, 2011

With just a click of your mouse, you can travel to Brazil to view "Othello," watch "Hamlet" in Egypt, attend "King Lear" in England, or see India's take on "A Midsummer's Night Dream."

This virtual field trip is courtesy of [Global Shakespeares](#), a free, open-access video and performance archive of 300 and counting Shakespeare and Shakespeare-influenced productions and clips from around the world.

"It's sort of a YouTube for Shakespearians and theater and film enthusiasts, but with much better stability and scholarly foundation," said GW Associate Professor of English [Alex Huang](#), co-founder of the archive.

A Shakespeare scholar, Dr. Huang created the archive along with Peter Donaldson, Ford Foundation Professor of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and fully launched it online in 2010. He came to George Washington in 2011 from Pennsylvania State University, where he taught for seven years.

The performances highlighted on Global Shakespeares can bring a breadth and depth to understanding the Bard and his work, said Dr. Huang.

"Great ideas transcend historical and cultural boundaries and can be articulated in many different forms and languages," he said. "Shakespeare lends himself to translation—many directors believe that Shakespeare in translation is more effective, more sexy and spicy than in his original text."

Dr. Huang added the cross-cultural interpretations can challenge assumptions about Shakespeare's most famous plays. "Encountering these plays through refreshing performances in new contexts can reinvigorate our dulled senses," he said. "Shakespeare in translation doesn't take away from the Bard. Instead, it makes his

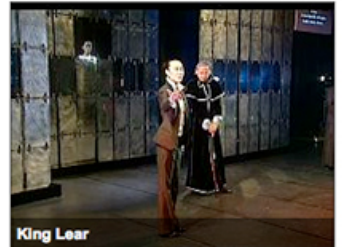
Online archive [Global Shakespeares](#) features more than 300 Shakespeare and Shakespeare-influenced performances from around the world.



Othello



L'Er zalci (Lear is Here)



King Lear



Shamuleta (Shamlet)

work more relevant to a worldwide audience.”

The video archive first began 10 years ago as a collection of tapes from field research trips in Dr. Huang’s office at Stanford University, where he earned a doctorate in comparative literature and a joint doctorate in humanities. As his collection grew, colleagues began requesting the videos to expose their students to Shakespeare performances from around the world.

Mailing the tapes back and forth quickly became unmanageable and new technologies for the production and distribution of digital video were rapidly becoming more accessible to educators, so Dr. Huang decided to bring the collection online.

“I thought, ‘Why don’t we take advantage of what is available technologically today, and really transform digital video to make it an integral part of the study of Shakespeare performance and a project to promote cross-cultural understanding?’” he said.

Global Shakespeares has been recognized as a valuable research source for scholars. It has been reviewed in major journals and newspapers, including Shakespeare Quarterly, the British Shakespeare Association’s Shakespeare and Asian Theatre Journal. The archive has also been indexed by the Modern Language Association’s bibliography, World Shakespeare Bibliography and other scholarly databases.

Each video on Global Shakespeares is posted with permission, is thoroughly researched and properly annotated, and contains subtitles when needed, said Dr. Huang.

Faculty at the University of California, Santa Barbara; Boston University; MIT; and universities in the United Kingdom, China, Switzerland, Korea and Brazil are using the project in their courses.

Analytics show Global Shakespeares has visitors from more than 88 countries—and these visitors used more than 55 languages to access the site, which features a dynamic map on which users can plot the trajectory of a touring production, interactive historical timeline, tabbed browsing and a variety of search options.

“You can find Shakespeare in places you might not even think of,” said Dr. Huang. Almost every continent is represented on the site, including Asia, South America and Europe.

One of the most interesting aspects of Global Shakespeares is that users can view the same play performed in different countries to see firsthand how different cultures interpret and perform pivotal scenes.

One example is a scene from Shakespeare’s bloodiest play, “Titus Andronicus,” where Lavinia, Titus’s daughter, is raped and her hands and tongue are cut off. How should actors perform this scene on stage?

“If you do it literally, you run the risk of diminishing Shakespeare’s tragedy into parody. Too much violence can become comical and it’s unreal,” said Dr. Huang. “Too little and you fail to convey the weight of the tragedy.”

One director from Japan had a solution. Director Yukio Ninagawa used red silk streamers to portray blood flowing from Lavinia after the attack.

“It’s beautiful and eerie at the same time,” said Dr. Huang. “This is one example of how different interpretations can transform our understanding of the play.”

There are also performances on Global Shakespeares that challenge widely accepted interpretations of Shakespeare’s better-known plays. For “The Merchant of Venice,” Dr. Huang said plays from Japan and China focus more on the question of justice in a capitalist society and Portia—the beautiful heiress disguised as a male lawyer—than on Shylock and anti-Semitism, a theme that post-Holocaust and particularly post-9/11 Western versions usually emphasize. The play is often retitled “The Woman Lawyer,” “A Bond of Flesh” or “A Pound of Flesh” in Asia.



And Dr. Huang noted "Othello" is a study of jealousy in many countries—and not of race. "Shakespeare as a global author has taken many forms since the building of the Globe in London," said Dr. Huang.

"That's the blind spot that our traditions can cast on us," said Dr. Huang. "When you look at Shakespeare in a global context you realize Shakespeare is much more capacious and profound and plays a very important role in the cultural life today."

Global Shakespeares is not only a cultural resource but also a teaching one. Using VITAL—Video Interaction for Teaching and Learning, a video-centric course management system connected to Global Shakespeares— Dr. Huang's students use performances on Global Shakespeares to create their own video clips and illustrate their own interpretations. Dr. Huang teaches two Shakespeare courses in the Columbian College of Arts and Sciences this semester.

"With VITAL, students play the role of a curator with films and video clips by critiquing them, circulating their film essays and commenting on one another's video collections and essays," said Dr. Huang.

"Once they make their first video clip, they're hooked," he said, adding that VITAL allows students to "slow down" by defamiliarizing the plays. "When students experience a speech such as Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' in radically new performance styles or in a foreign language, they can approach it without prejudice or learned reverence," he said.

Dr. Huang, a member of GW's Medieval and Early Modern Studies Institute in the Columbian College of Arts and Sciences and the Sigur Center for Asian Studies in the Elliott School of International Affairs, holds a position as a research affiliate in literature at MIT. He is widely published in the field of Shakespeare and early modern studies and has appeared on a number of media outlets, including the BBC, to talk about the fields of digital humanities and global Shakespeare. In spring 2012, he will be a fellow at the Folger Shakespeare Library.

Although many Shakespeare scholars prefer more traditional productions, Dr. Huang said the more creative, out-of-the-box interpretations of Shakespeare plays are actually the ones that end up revealing the most about the Bard.

"The reason Shakespeare is still alive today is because he's able to thrive in so many different environments," he said. "No other playwright from any other culture has this ability."

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