

PERFORMANCE

Shakespeare goes global online: Review of *Global Shakespeares Video & Performance Archive (SPIA – Shakespeare Performance in Asia)*, edited by Peter S. Donaldson and Alex Huang: An open-access, collaborative online research project presented by Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)

Yvonne Griggs*

De Montfort University, Leicester, UK

The scope and breadth of this project is impressive. It is the product of many years of scholarship and a model of collaborative practice. MIT's Peter Donaldson has been involved in cross-media enterprises related to Shakespeare in performance for some time,¹ and this global project evolved from the mutual scholarly interests of Donaldson and Alex Huang,² who joined forces to work on an interactive web-based archive when the MIT *Shakespeare Electronic Archive* received major funding in 2006. Since then, co-editors Donaldson and Huang have concentrated on the development of the archive's first portal, SPIA, launched in April 2009. At the time of writing this review only the SPIA portal was fully developed and available online, and thus it forms the content of my observations. However, following the launch of *Global Shakespeares* in August 2010, the development of further portals is under way; portals dedicated to India, Brazil, and Shakespeare in the Arab World are already works in progress, and may also be available by now.

The accessibility and global reach of the archive lends the project an egalitarian ethos. It sets out, according to Donaldson and Huang, to establish "no single meaning, no authoritatively fixed form" of Shakespeare's texts, "but rather a matrix of versions and interpretations" from across the world, offering cultural diversity and "an expanded view of the 'text'" within a global framework (Huang). The aims of *Global Shakespeares* in general and of *SPIA* in particular are clearly outlined on the site: they promote accessibility for all, foster global cross-fertilisation of ideas, and seek to establish a research network amongst those working in the field, from practitioners, to scholars, to those teaching at the grass roots level. That the site's wealth of resources should be accessible without charge and to all who wish to engage with Shakespeare on a global scale is in itself a laudable achievement, especially in this age of commercially driven enterprise. However, it is the outstanding *quality* of the site's inclusions that makes it one of the most impressive resources available to date, for both those embarking on scholarly research related to Shakespeare and those who simply have a desire to know more about not only Shakespeare but the cultural practices of other nations. My current MA and PhD

*Email: ygriggs@dmu.ac.uk

students are already finding the site incredibly useful in their own research areas, and as a former teacher with many years' experience at the chalkface, I know that there are classroom practitioners out there who would find such things as the site's archival footage of lesser-known Asian film adaptations of Shakespeare's works an invaluable means to engaging the imagination of even the most reluctant high school pupil.

The site's Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive is a constantly evolving product of collaboration between the MIT's Shakespeare Project, the National University of Singapore's multi-modal Relocating Intercultural Theatre and Gunma/Doho Universities' Web Archive of Asian Shakespeare Productions. Through their shared aims, scholars working on these projects seek to establish global scholarly communities that promote the comparative study of Shakespeare in performance, foregrounding through example the mutual benefit of shared practice. The site provides an extensive online archive of Asian Shakespeare productions, accompanied by online access to an ever-growing number of full productions and performance clips. The performative range and scope of the inclusions is remarkable; we are able to move with ease from Beijing Opera performances of *Macbeth* (*Kingdom of Desire*, 1986) to Noh theatre productions of *Othello* (*Othello*, 2005), and avant-garde performative translations of *Hamlet* (Ong Keng Sen's 2002 *Hamlet*) at the click of a button, with the very helpful addition of on-screen translations in various languages if desired. Both the financial cost and time constraints inherent in tracking down such performance footage have hitherto been prohibitive for most researchers; to be provided with free access to this archive is indeed a huge step forward. Moreover, what may have been "lost" to all but audiences present at the moment of performance is now held in time for a future audience, at least in part, via recordings that would not necessarily have been undertaken if not for their inclusion in this online performance library. It adds, as a consequence, a wealth of resources which would otherwise remain invisible to all but the most seasoned traveller, or the most fortunate and well-funded scholar.

In addition to providing access to a vast range of performative responses to Shakespeare's plays, the site offers its audience a wealth of further information and interactive facilities. Ultimately, the success of such interactive facilities is dependent upon the ease with which they can be utilized; thankfully, the site *is* easy to navigate. There will, it is noted, be further interactive tools added to the site as it evolves but the range of tools available at present is already substantial. The catalogue of productions lists 248 titles noting full production details – title of play/production; director and company; city/country performed/produced in; dates of performance; genre – and an online search facility that enables the user to browse the catalogue for performances related to each of these particulars. A search for performances of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, for example, produces a list of 26 performances, four of which offer a "click to play" facility that takes us straight to a streamed online clip. It is unfortunate that not all performances listed are accompanied by illustrative clips (or full video performance as is the case in some instances) but this is a problem related to permissions and availability rather than a criticism of the site. Similarly a search of the site's extensive genre category (with listings as various as "film" and "video game" to "kabuki" and "opera") draws together performances of a particular type. Information about each or all productions is also available in table

format, on a timeline, or plotted onto a map, providing the user with a number of ways to engage with the data generated. The maps, with their colour-coding of the specific plays, are a particularly impressive means to visualizing the global depth and range of Shakespeare performance in Asia. The editorial team's on-site claim that "the centre of creativity in Shakespeare performance is shifting from Europe and the U.S. to Asia" is visually reinforced when one tracks Asian performance via the site's mapping facility. Whilst the legitimacy of such a claim may be challenged by some Shakespeare scholars, the team's assertion that what we are witnessing is the emergence of a "new and exciting wave of East-West cultural exchange" is clearly demonstrated by the wealth and quality of material presented on the site.

Via the portal's "Commentary" section, we are able to access interviews, essays, information about actors, directors and companies, and there is an extensive bibliography detailing over 50 texts related to Asian and International Shakespeare. Some subsections are more developed than others but as the site evolves so too, one assumes, will its bank of resources. Scholarly essays of a type more readily available only through subscription to academic journals are also available online, and unlike other free internet sites, this one is administered by experts in the field who vet its content prior to inclusion. Essays such as Huang's "Shakespeare, Performance, and Autobiographical Interventions" and Li LanYong's "Shakespeare, Asian Actors and Intercultural Spectatorship", offer stimulating discussion of matters relating to Shakespeare in performance. Though few in number at present, this body of freely available and easily accessible articles should continue to grow, encouraging the kind of cross-fertilisation the site is designed to foster. Indeed, one of the project's particular strengths is its capacity to generate further discussion forums: users are warmly invited to email the MIT team with comments and queries pertaining to the site and its contents. Such an invitation *may* invite some less "meaningful" queries of a type related to access and technical matters, but the team are aware of this issue and are currently working on the addition of an FAQ (frequently asked question) facility which should circumvent the problem, providing users with easy access to practical advice. Similarly, whilst we are directed to use Quicktime in order to access clips, perhaps a more prominent directive to users as to which web browser will best facilitate access would help to eliminate some of the frustrations one can first encounter when trying to open clips. For the techno-savvy such matters will present little difficulty, but for technophobes like me a directive on the web page – or as a response within an FAQ facility – would ensure trouble-free access to clips.

Global Shakespeares adds to what is a growing body of accessible online research; the *British Universities Film & Video Council's International Database of Shakespeare on Film and Television*, *Shakespeare Quarterly's World Shakespeare Biography Online*, or any of the numerous Shakespeare online resources already generated by Peter Donaldson at MIT in recent years, provide users with a wealth of resources and information. However, *Global Shakespeares* is expanding the existing boundaries of online resources: its open access ethos and the quality of both its content and its design offer an exemplary model for future online projects.

Notes

1. Peter Donaldson has been instrumental in the development of the *Shakespeare Electronic Archive* (<http://www.shea.mit.edu>), *Hamlet on the Ramparts*, *Xmas* (Cross-Media Annotation System).
2. Alexander C.Y. Huang worked on the *Shakespeare in Asia* site (<http://www.sia.stanford.edu>) in 2004, and has been collecting video archive materials related to the area since 2001.

Reference

- Huang, Alexander C.Y. "Global Shakespeare 2.0 and the Task of the Performance Archive." *Shakespeare Survey* 64 (2011): 38–51.