

CHAPTER SIX

SITING AND CITING *HAMLET* IN ELSINORE, DENMARK

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Central to the debate about the nature of appropriation is not just cultural difference, but the dynamic interactions between fictional and cultural localities. The concept of locality will be the focus of discussion in this chapter, because in the theatrical transculturation, Shakespeare's currency is developed through a combination of sights (visions of Shakespeare on and off stage) and sites (allegorical and physical locations of the production). The locality of performance is an integral part of the question about the nature of Shakespeare's afterlife. At stake is the interplay between the locality where Shakespearean authenticity is derived and the locality where global differences emerge. What happens when Shakespearean adaptations capitalize on, and indeed rely upon, not just historical fictions but reconfigured localities within and beyond Shakespeare's plays? How do twentieth and twenty-first century theatre artists adapt *Hamlet's* localities to enhance the perceived value of the performance and its venue? What do these aesthetic manoeuvres tell us about Shakespearean appropriation?

A case in point is Singaporean troupe TheatreWorks's *Search: Hamlet*, directed by Ong Keng Sen and staged at Kronborg Castle in Elsinore, Denmark in 2002.¹ Rich and diverse in dramaturgical concerns, this production showcases how Shakespearean localities, performance venue and the cultural location of the performance interact with one another. *Search: Hamlet* experimented with a multinational cast and intercultural theatre, yet the play clung obstinately to the notion of site-specific performance. Commissioned by the Hamlet Sommer festival, this production highlighted the connections between its sites of origin – Asia, Europe, America – and its performance venue, Kronborg, in order to create an anti-essentialist discourse. Concentrating on selected aspects of the production, especially the contestations of locality-derived authority

and authenticity, this chapter establishes how these two national or transnational appropriations negotiated and translated the currency of locality through the site of performance, the perceived sites of origin of the performance idioms, as well as the allegorical sites and settings of *Hamlet* that erase or accentuate the presence of Shakespeare, Europe and Asia. In each of these cases, primacy was given to the performance venue and the local habitation of the play. These elements were configured to participate actively in the meaning-making processes.

Since the mid-twentieth century there have been more and more productions that are locally conceived but globally marketed, that tour widely and are far from site-specific. In fact, much of their viability hinges upon their transportability and global accessibility. The Royal Shakespeare Company's touring performances are some of the most prominent examples. In contrast to productions that tour to multiple locations, the site-specific *Hamlet* play in Elsinore is defined by its local specificities that will be lost on a different audience in a different performance venue or context. When Shakespearean localities collide or merge with the localities of the performance, new stories are created to meet the challenge or to exploit the perceived connections and disjunctions. Site-specific appropriations contrast with more readily transferable performances that tour from city to city and with Hollywood Shakespearean appropriations. Ong's local-international Shakespeare in Elsinore allows us to see the unique blessings and curses of interculturalism. The dynamics between the geographical location and cultural location of a performance complicate the locality of the play being performed. While certain meanings of the production will be produced by the performance style and adapted story, other meanings must be produced by the clash of these two localities. Theatrical performances stage at once the fictional, cultural and actual sites embedded within and beyond the plays themselves. Furthermore, directorial choices have to be made in relation to the play's and the performance's localities, suppressing or highlighting the differences, as the case may be.

With the rapid development of cultural tourism and theatrical interculturalism, for better or worse, twenty-first century artists capitalize on reconfigured localities surrounding Shakespeare's plays and the performance venues, in order to enhance the value of the site-specific production. Ong created a *Hamlet*-inspired performance in which the title character is missing. *Search: Hamlet* was sponsored by a number of private, government, and transnational funding agencies, including the Asia-Europe Foundation, the Danish Centre for Culture and Development, the Singapore National Arts Council, the Embassy of Japan, the Embassy

of Indonesia, and the Danish Theatre and Music Council. *Search: Hamlet* is the last part of Ong's Shakespeare trilogy, preceded by a pan-Asian *Lear* from 1997 and an avantgarde *Desdemona* from 2000, both of which were equally well supported by a myriad of transnational funding agencies, including the Japan Foundation Asia Center. Established in 1972, the Japan Foundation promotes overseas Japanese-language education. From 1995 to 2004, the Asia Center existed as a subsidiary organization to promote "the co-existence of different ethnic groups" and "the harmonization of traditional and contemporary culture" (Japan Foundation 2). It had an intra-Asian focus, believing that in order to tackle various social ills brought forth by the rapid development and accumulation of wealth in Asia, "efforts must be made to promote balanced mutual exchange [...] through exposure to the best of Asian arts and cultures [...] and to encourage a more comprehensive grasp of Asian languages, histories, and societies" (Japan Foundation 2). Ong's *Lear*, funded by the Japan Foundation Asia Center, thus took an intra-Asian approach to intercultural performance and to Shakespeare's text.

This intra-regional focus can also be seen, with revisions, in some of his other work. Ong's parents emigrated to multi-ethnic Singapore from southern China, and Ong speaks English, Mandarin Chinese and a southern Chinese dialect.² Ong's multicultural background and Singapore's cultural policy to encourage border-crossing works contributed to his inclination to fuse multiple performance traditions to create new spectacles. Ong, the founder and director of TheatreWorks in Singapore, received his training at the Tisch School of New York University. As a result, he is versed in postcolonial and postmodern theories. According to Ong, he wanted to gain further insight into Asian performing traditions and intercultural possibilities, and that was why he chose to study at one of the few institutions that would provide such an opportunity (Ong 1995). This intra-Asian focus distinguishes Ong from most East Asian intercultural directors with experiences of studying in America or Europe, who seek to wed Western styles to local traditions. Curating and directing in the USA, Germany, Japan, Australia, Denmark, among other places in 2002 alone, with only four weeks at home in Singapore, Ong is very conscious of intercultural processes and cultural transmission.

Ong's work has been described as "highly self-conscious, deeply Asian, and undeniably marketable with its high gloss – even glib – post-modernism" (quoted in Wee 781). However, Ong has maintained that marketability should not take over art, because "it is important to expand the meaning of 'Asian' rather than to limit it" (Ong 1995). He has cautioned that

We have to be careful not to stereotype what is meant by 'Asian' – that it has to be traditional or that it has to be filled with history. These definitions of Asian would immediately exclude you [referring to his interviewer Mok Wai Yin] and I [*sic*] in the sense that we are English-speaking and completely contemporary. (Ong 1995)

Search: Hamlet's mode of fusing disparate cultural locations represented by actors' bodies and performance styles can be traced back to the first play in Ong's trilogy, the multilingual pan-Asian *Lear*. Ong's *Lear* singled out the theme of miscommunication in *King Lear*. The production featured four languages (Chinese, Japanese, Thai and Indonesian), six nationalities, and a variety of Asian performing styles (Peking opera, Noh, and Penkac Silat, among others). Needless to say, the adaptation did not follow Shakespeare's script. Like Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, who searches for a national identity through the performance of *Hamlet*, Ong's actors went in search of a new Asian identity through this multilingual production. The audience had to rely on the English subtitles to follow Ong's play, but this pan-Asian *Lear* played to full houses in Tokyo, Osaka, Fukuoka, Singapore, other parts of Asia, and Europe.

Ong's *Lear* can be considered a milestone in Asian theatre and in Shakespeare performance, because it used multiple Asian languages and performing styles to physically embody the key theme of identity formation in *King Lear*, which would have been unthinkable until recently. Ong also addressed the issue of globalization through the amalgamated performance vocabulary. The king not only spoke Japanese, but acted in the stately style of the traditional Noh theatre. The power-thirsty elder daughter, who kills him and the sister, spoke Mandarin, and not just colloquial Mandarin, but high-pitched Peking-opera Mandarin. The younger sister spoke in Thai, though she seldom spoke. The assassins sent by the elder daughter spoke Indonesian and crossed the stage in the style of Penkac Silat martial art. Different languages and different performing styles also symbolized the conflict between parent and child. The role of the old man, a loose equivalent to Shakespeare's *Lear*, played by Naohiko Umewaka, involved walking in the style of Noh and speaking a stately Japanese. The diversity of, and discrepancy between, languages and performance styles physicalized on stage the confrontation between localities and generations. Ong has pointed out that "in this production of *Lear*, I have attempted to search for a new world, a new Asia. This new Asia will continue to have a dialogue with the old, with traditions, with history" (Ong 1997). He emphasized that "harmony is not what I seek but discord. We can no longer hold onto simple visions of the outside world

and the 'other'" (Ong 1997). In this way, the play negotiated roots, identity and tradition.

Search: Hamlet shares some features with *Lear*, but it also marks a new beginning in Ong's intercultural engagements. On the one hand, keenly aware of the homogenizing effect of transnational patrons and intercultural borrowings, Ong attempted an alternative approach to theatrical cosmopolitanism: a presentational style that displayed cultures yet recognized the beauty of difference. *Search: Hamlet* sought a style that did not stereotypically align each culture with its perceived traditional form of expression, the key to the perceived successes and alleged failures of Ong's controversial pan-Asian multilingual *Lear*. While the performance space of *Search: Hamlet* is filled with Danish historical specificities and fictional Shakespearean references, the premise of the performance is far from site-specific. The viability of this production hinges on the interaction between site-specific presentations and an undefined titular character.

On the other hand, *Search: Hamlet* continued the themes of identity formation and identity crisis that Ong explored in *Lear* and *Desdemona*. His attempt to reveal and solve a series of identity crises posed by the plays *Hamlet* and *Search: Hamlet* and by the international cast led to even more malleable boundaries between different sites of identity formation. Some characters were played by performers of the opposite sex: Gertrude was played by Pichet Kluchun, a cross-dressed classical Thai dancer, the ghost by Carlotta Ikeda, a Japanese-French dancer, Laertes by Aida Redza from Malaysia, and Polonius by Ann Crosset, a Danish-American actress. With race-blind casting, Ong hoped to avoid "a simple substitution of an Asian face for a European face" (Ong 2002, 18).

The scenes in *Search: Hamlet* were arranged into five books, following the style of a Noh play. The first half of the performance began in different spaces in the castle and moved gradually into the courtyard. Audience members were invited to participate in interstitial tours. During the first part of *Search: Hamlet*, one could choose one of the simultaneous guided tours through the basement or different rooms of the castle, walking past costumes and other actors in preparation. The second half was a *tour-de-force* of the five books, including a prologue and an epilogue: Book of the Ghost, Book of the Warrior (Laertes), Book of the Young Girl (Ophelia), Book of the Mad Woman (Gertrude), and Book of the Demon (Claudius). A short film made by the Chinese filmmaker Wu Wenguang was shown during the interval, which reminded the audience of the home movie in Michael Almereyda's film *Hamlet* from 2000 that replaces the play-within-a-play, and provided a self-reflexive moment. Pulling this diverse

group of characters and actors together was a Noh-style storyteller played by Charlotte Engelkes from Sweden. The performance was billed as an indoor and open-air “dance-theatre event, a free interpretation of Shakespeare’s play” in Ong’s words (Ong 2002). It was a performance about Hamlet, in which Hamlet was missing yet omnipresent because of his absence. Hamlet did not have a face or a body. The arrangement invited the audience to posit the possibility that anyone can be Hamlet. Ong’s conceptual questions – who is Hamlet in our time? can everyone be Hamlet? and is Hamlet an Everyman? – can be perceived as universal, relevant to contemporary audiences from all cultures, and not site-specific. They beg the question of why Kronborg and why *Hamlet*.

When invited to participate in the 2002 Hamlet Sommer festival by Peter Langdal and Henrik Hartmann, theatre directors of the Betty Nansen Teatret, Ong insisted that he would only accept the invitation if he could stage a “site-specific version [of *Hamlet*] at Kronborg, in its different rooms” (Ong 2001). As a celebrated intercultural director, Ong has gone through a number of different phases, from creating so-called New Asian identities through a multilingual performance with a pan-Asian cast, to battling his Western audiences’ tendency to box him and label him as an Asian intercultural artist providing an “ethnic night out” (Ong 2001). He named several reasons to stage the site-specific reworking of *Hamlet*. He argued that *Search: Hamlet* was not about cultural categories but about “personal idiosyncrasies” and “personal eccentricities” (Scavenius) in relation to the particular site of Kronborg. The casting and flexible combination of improvised scenes and scripted choreographed dances in different parts of the castle demonstrated that each individual performer and actor would have a different experience and relation to the site and the production as a whole. Ong pointed out that while Kronborg might be foreign to some Asian artists unaccustomed to performing in such a space, the castle is not alien to Ann Crosset, an American performer who has lived in Denmark for many years. What passes as local is not defined by race, ethnicity or cultural heritage, but rather by lived experiences.

All of the reasons Ong named demonstrate his awareness of the perils of rash eulogies of interculturalism, that can be easily associated with his stature (a staple of apparently progressive yet quintessential Asia) and Elsinore (the locus of fantasies of origin for *Hamlet*). There have been reasons for concern about the ethical implications of Ong’s intercultural projects. Critics were not optimistic about the visions of interculturalism found in Ong’s pan-Asian *Lear* (see Bharucha and Wee 782), but Ong – at odds with his “own hybridity as a Chinese-Singaporean, who speaks Chinese with his parents but ‘conceptualizes’ his productions in English”

(quoted in Wee) – is constantly on the move. He has not been restricted to a specific vision or a specific locality in any work. *Search: Hamlet* evidences some of the new directions he is exploring, in particular site-specific production.

Ong rightly pointed out that “locating [*Search: Hamlet*] at Kronborg would raise all sorts of cultural issues such as cultural authenticity and possession” (Ong 2002, 18). He went on to argue that this positionality would enable his audience to rethink a set of questions, such as “should globalization develop specificities to take into account different localities, different contexts, different individual circumstances?” (Ong 2002, 18). Ong was less interested in mingling different iconic cultural symbols (as he did in *Lear*) than in locating the meaning of *Hamlet* in our age and the specificities of his Hamlet play custom-made for Kronborg. He stated in an interview:

Audiences in Tokyo, Berlin, New York, Singapore and Denmark are not the same. You cannot produce one work and tour it to five cities with an identical production. The fact that we are site specific at Kronborg forces us to tailor it to Denmark, which I think is very important in this floating space of international performance. Kronborg is an important root to make us specific. (Ong 2002, 45)

What remains unanswered is whether Kronborg is seen by Ong and his audience as a site of collective memories of flirting with historical authenticity. Do the Hamlet-Sommer internationalism and the Hamlet myth of Kronborg make the castle a convenient yet enticing point of reference and a point of origin? The programme of *Search: Hamlet* qualifies, in Danish and in English, that:

Shakespeare [...] never visited Kronborg, or Denmark for that matter, but several of his friends did and, besides, the story about the Danish prince was widely known throughout Europe. (Ong 2002, 13)

The programme also elaborates motives for the collaborative project that are decidedly local. Langdal and Hartmann of Betty Nansen Teatret, one of the key organizing institutions, have written straightforwardly:

The project [*Search: Hamlet*] is born out of a political question: why do 75% of the Danish population vote for 3 major parties, whose goal is to send the 2% that are of non-European heritage out of Denmark? What makes us so afraid of foreigners that we do not want them to be in our country? We want to use our theatre space to find the answer to this question. (Ong 2002, 6)

Search: Hamlet was an intercultural exercise in formulating an ontological answer (everyone is Hamlet, as shown by Wu's short film *Search: Hamlet in China*) to the political question above. The presence of the cultural locations of Denmark, Asia and China in the performance was accidental, as evidenced by the epilogue. The storyteller commented that she was "not yet playing Hamlet", and that she did not "know where he is" or "why everybody is looking for him". She concluded that she was "not looking / But definitely existing" (Ong 2003, 8). Following the Danish theatre tradition for commemorating a renowned performer, the storyteller danced with a spotlight, a "living space" in Ong's words, that came to represent Hamlet (Ong 2002, 20). Ong was concerned about the inadequacy of any performer to play Hamlet in such a multicultural production. He decided to design the performance to revolve around Hamlet's stories, but to eliminate the role of Hamlet. However, the absent Hamlet was still represented by a spotlight in a style appropriated from the Danish tradition to honour a dead performer. As such, Hamlet became a "living space", suggesting rather than confirming "a concrete situation" (Ong 2002, 20).

Consistent with this configuration of cultural locations through actors' bodies (or the absence thereof), Wu's film *Search: Hamlet in China* also brings different localities into one theatrical presentation. Shown during the intermission, Wu's film about hunting for Hamlet in contemporary China provided interesting meta-narratives. The film drives home the message that being gay and Chinese at the same time can be disastrous, especially in Beijing, the perceived core of Chinese political authoritarian culture. Ong indicated that he intended to use the Wu film to turn the tables:

In [*Hamlet*], Hamlet organises a touring company of actors [to perform...] in order to make the king reveal himself [...] hopefully [Wu's film] reveals certain things to the audience about themselves. Maybe how open they are. Just like Hamlet held a mirror up to Claudius, Wenguang is holding the mirror up to us, the audience. (Ong 2002, 46)

That mirror not only showed audiences the prospect of becoming an outsider in a globalized world, by putting on display a gay Chinese man's journey in Beijing, but also residual images of China as a cultural site, as did the presence of other Asian performers. Their presence made their bodies into sites of cultural memories on display. Yet Ong considered the film to be allegorical, a mid-point in the signifying process, not a display of cultural difference:

The film brings to the fore the whole question of whether to be or not to be a gay man in a culture [China] where it is illegal to be gay. And you also begin to realise that perhaps one part of Hamlet's tension was that he could never be right. (Ong 2002, 46)

Ultimately, sexuality is not the most important theme of this film, which concentrates on a defamiliarization of cultural space through the perspective of an outsider, who is cast as a loose equivalent to Hamlet, an outsider in the castle. Wu's film appeared to be a documentary, with street shots and scenes shot on an underground train in China. We heard a gay man speak about humiliations and an old Chinese woman comment, "I don't know much about Hamlet, but everyone should have offspring". Ong hoped the audience would see Hamlet's problem, not China's social ills. Whether this self-conscious rootedness could cure the ills of under-theorized eulogies of interculturalism remains problematic, but it is clear that *Search: Hamlet* has articulated a vision of locality-inflected cosmopolitanism through reconfigured localities, the multinational cast, and a productive fusion of European and Asian performing traditions.

In Elsinore, the fictional inhabits the actual site of production. In turn, the performance site and its cultural location reconfigure the fictional. Ong's work produces *différence* and fertile novelty to comment on the ethics of cosmopolitanism. *Search: Hamlet* articulates forms of "rooted cosmopolitanism", to borrow Domna C. Stanton's term from a different context. Though one may wonder whether the multiple local origins in *Search: Hamlet*, like the site of Kronborg itself, was used as a platform for international attention, it is clear that Ong prioritizes the need to deny cultural authenticity derivative of any single cultural location being represented in the performance.

Furthermore, he insists on the significance of designing site-specific productions that cannot and will not be toured to other locations, in the hope that this will resist certain undesirable effects of globalization. Reworking *Hamlet* in Elsinore showed that Shakespearean appropriation can be inspired and complicated by the tensions between (self-)syndicated authentic sites for the presence of Shakespeare and for the presence of cultural otherness. What we call Shakespeare is manufactured and consumed at the junctures where these localities meet. These projects not only appropriated Shakespeare's texts, but also the various sites of representation.

This returns us to the dialectical relationship between locality and authority. The concept of locality encompasses a number of related ideas, including the setting of a drama, the city and venue of a performance, the cultural coordinates of the audience, and all the meanings derived from

these physical and allegorical sites. A great deal of creative energy has been directed towards the instance when the locality from which perceived authenticity is derived, such as Hamlet's castle, and the locality of performance converge. Festivals and artists work hard to bring their patrons an authentic Shakespearean experience in venues openly known to be fictional. These sites cannot properly be said to exist. Some of these sites serve as the backdrop to Shakespeare's plays and tourists flock to experience the illusion for themselves. The locations then dress themselves up to meet and generate the demands of cultural tourism, dressing themselves as something they are not. This is evidenced by the following statement from the Hamlet Sommer website, which explores *Hamlet's* Danish connection:

400 years ago Shakespeare wrote the drama about Hamlet, which takes place at Kronborg Castle and has proved to be internationally very durable. [...] Saxo Grammaticus tells the legend about Amled, a Prince of Jutland, in his 'Danish Chronicles' that were written just before year 1200. Since 1816 there have been many performances of *Hamlet* at Kronborg Castle, with great actors like Laurence Olivier, Vivian Leigh, John Gielgud, Kenneth Branagh, Jacob Jacobi. [...] A Hamlet-cult commenced and established the local link to Elsinore, which flourishes to this very day.

This extract preserves the oddity of the original text. It indicates that the Danish Hamlet's castle operates on similar principles to those found in the promotion of cultural tourism to Harry Potter's England, the Tokyo Daikanyama neighborhood of *Lost in Translation*, the New Zealand of *Lord of the Rings*, or the *Da Vinci Code's* Europe (Louvre, Église Saint-Sulpice, Rosslyn Chapel and more). Manufactured and consumed in cycles of fictionalization, these locations now exist simultaneously in different temporal and spatial dimensions in the fictional and real worlds. It is important to note that authenticity in and by itself may not always be the claim to fame of these sites, as evidenced by Disneyland's "blatantly inauthentic attractions" that attract many tourists (Cohen 292). Rather, what often fascinates and solicits repeated visits is the site's ability to "point to a sedimented history and [...] a connected otherness [...] that reach [...] to the land of the dead" (Kennedy 2000, 10-11)

A large part of this phenomenon is driven by the forces of the market economy (Bennett 507), but it is important to recognize the intricate interplay between self-syndicated authentic venues (for the presence of Shakespeare or his characters) and theatrical spaces where Shakespeare is produced and consumed. Two examples that readily come to mind are Stratford-upon-Avon and the Globe Theatre, both representing historically

authentic venues baptized by a Shakespearean presence that fuels what has been called "fantasies of origin" (Hodgdon). The worldwide Shakespeare industry has constructed venues competing for this authenticity, including locations with apparently authentic local flavours that contrast with the foreignness of Shakespeare, and self-syndicated authentic sites for imported spectacles such as the Tokyo Globe (see Takao). These site-specific productions are as much readings of Shakespeare's symbolic capital as re-readings of globally articulated localities.

Notes

¹ I follow the East Asian convention and put family name first, followed by given names. The production premiered at Kronborg Castle, Elsinore, Denmark, 16-23 August 2002. It ran for another three nights, 22-24 September 2002, at the Betty Nansen theatre in Edison, Copenhagen, Denmark.

² Ethnic Chinese comprise 76.2 % of Singapore's population, and Malays and Indians 13.8 % and 8.3 % respectively. The four official languages are English, Malay, Mandarin Chinese, and Tamil.

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Detached from Shakespeare's English, *Hamlet* has been rewritten numerous times in European languages, the various translations into any one language jostling with each other for dominance and spawning new *Hamlets* that depart decisively from Shakespeare as a source. This book focuses on the rich tradition of drawing from *Hamlet* in European cultures to produce new, independent works, which include *Hamlet* theatre, *Hamlet* ballet, *Hamlet* poetry, *Hamlet* fiction, *Hamlet* essays and *Hamlet* films. It examines how the myth of *Hamlet* has crossed back and forth over Europe's linguistic borders for four hundred years, repeatedly reinvigorated by being bent to specific geo-political and cultural locations. The enquiries in this book show how, in the process of translation, adaptation and reinventing, *Hamlet* has become the common cultural currency of Europe.

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