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Asian Shakespeare 2.0

Asia. An impossible interpellation.

—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2006: 121)

How many ages hence

Shall this our lofty scene be acted over,

In states unborn and accents yet unknown!

—*Julius Caesar* 3.1.112–114 (Shakespeare 2005)

The age of Asian Shakespeare 2.0 has arrived. It is an age in which performing Shakespeare in Asian theatrical styles generates incredible artistic and intellectual energy. It is an age in which certain Asian theatrical practices are foreign at home and abroad, while Shakespeare is proclaimed, once again, the bearer of universal currency. It is an age in which Asian performance and Shakespearean interpretations foster symbiotic and antithetical relationships with equal force and ever-increasing pace—fueled by the efficacy of virtual media (video sharing and social networking sites among them) and by rapid localization of globally circulating goods, ideas, and art works. Neither Asia nor Shakespeare has unified identities in any meaningful sense or even consolidated economic interests. Rather, they are defined by remarkable internal divisions and incongruities.

The last two decades of the twentieth century marked the first phase of sustained study of Asian Shakespeare performance as a marginalized cultural phenomenon (Leiter 1986; Kennedy 1993; Brown 1999). The present time is defined by the rise of Asian Shakespeare 2.0 as both artistic and intellectual paradigms. As theatre artists challenge fixated notions of tradition, critics are no longer confined by the question of narrowly defined cultural authenticity. More notable

productions are emerging across Asia, and these productions are being archived, read closely, and used as case studies in the classroom. Stage directors such as Ninagawa Yukio, Oh Tae-suk, Ong Keng Sen, and Wu Hsing-kuo reached diverse audiences through new strategies to bring together different cultural contexts and genres. A wave of new English-language scholarship since 2000 also put Asian Shakespeare performance in the spotlight (Trivedi and Minami 2010; Kennedy and Yong 2010; Huang and Ross 2009; Huang 2009a, 2009b; Lee et al. 2009; Dionne and Kapadia 2008; Chaudhuri and Lim 2006; Trivedi and Bartholomeusz 2005; Minami, Carruthers, and Gillies 2001). But there are critical gaps to be filled in research on the topic. First of all, the two-way traffic of intercultural exchange has not been addressed adequately. Important in their own right, questions such as “what is it that endures when [Shakespeare] is deprived of his tongue?” dominated the research in the 1990s and continue to guide certain inquiries today (Kennedy 1993: 17; Kennedy and Yong 2010: 21), and the sea change occurring within Asian performing traditions has taken a back seat to what has been perceived as more urgent questions on Shakespeare’s place in the modern world. Scholars are now seeking answers to how Asian Shakespeare formulates firsthand experience rooted in Asia (Trivedi and Minami 2010: 6).

This special issue adds to the scholarship on global Shakespeare and Asian theatre’s relationship to Anglophone cultural texts. As an Asianist and Shakespearean constantly moving among a number of fields that do not usually talk to one another, I am very grateful to Kathy Foley and *Asian Theatre Journal* for giving me this opportunity to edit this issue and put on several hats at once. The selection of essays has been consciously designed to include historical as well as contemporary work and to highlight diverse geographical areas even as some articles and interviews cover the usual suspects, such as Japan. Supplemented by reviews of performances, an exhibition, online resources, and books, as well as artists’ reflections on their own works and an interview, these articles contextualize the arrival of Asian Shakespeare 2.0.

Kathy Foley attempts to draw lines of convergence among what, at first glance, are disparate companies: an emerging troupe (Naked Masks) in Bangkok that tries to make Shakespeare a Thai contemporary, the work of a Balinese-influenced American company (Shadowlight) working in the shadow medium, and a Japanese theatre group (Setagaya) led by a traditionally trained *kyōgen* actor. Howard Choy’s article on Tang Shu-wing’s *Titus Andronicus 2.0* shows the variety of approaches that directors have taken toward the violence of the script, noting the tendencies toward sensationalizing or aestheticizing. He contrasts these approaches with Tang’s physical theatre, which gives

viewers a visceral experience but via a theatre of minimalism that never panders but rather probes.

Brett Hough discusses a Balinese *Macbeth* in the light of preservation of *gambuh*, a form that is seen as the source of all subsequent Balinese dance-drama genres. He argues that the strict replication of the *gambuh* form precisely as it was handed down from the prior generation will do less to save the genre than such creative recastings as this innovative production, which won enthusiastic response from both participating artists and audiences. Hyon-u Lee discusses a series of *Hamlets* in Korea since the 1990s, demonstrating how the script has been indigenized using aspects of Korean shamanism and its exorcistic traditions. Lee sees the popularity of this script linked to exorcising the traumatic history of the nation, with its history of Japanese colonialism, political division, and fratricidal war. Along a similar vein, Judy Celine Ick shows how Shakespeare is reimagined in Filipino theatre using the genre of *komedya*, which rejects the visible signs of difference (race/color) that lie at the core of Western *Othellos*. Religion becomes the element that “others” the hero in a Filipino frame. Dan Venning focuses on the Merchant Ivory film *Shakespeare Wallah* but illuminates the history of the theatre company that provided both the actors and the beginning point for the film’s story. Comparing and contrasting the film and the history of the Shakespearean company Venning examines the ways in which colonial strains and intercultural endeavors become intertwined in the company’s work. Aragorn Quinn’s paper, which was presented at the 2009 Association of Asian Performance Conference, is a comparative study of two Japanese scripts of *Julius Caesar* that were published in 1883 and 1884. He shows how the two interpretations were radically different in their politics, one in favor of the Meiji oligarchy and the second urging democracy and struggling against the ruling clique. *Julius Caesar* was translated early and often because it was malleable to comment on the political situation of the period. Translators were less concerned with Shakespeare’s intent than with new ways to use Shakespeare as a vehicle to advance their political ideology.

The practitioners’ perspectives are equally valuable. This issue provides a number of reflections by artists on their own translations and productions. Daniel Yang, former artistic director of the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre and producing artistic director of the Colorado Shakespeare Festival, compares his version of *King Lear* in Hong Kong (1993) to a different production of the play in Beijing (1986). Khai Thu Nguyen discusses a version of *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* that she recently codirected in Vietnam. Ching-Hsi Perng shares his approaches to translating and adapting *The Merchant of Venice* to *bangzi* theatre in Taiwan. We learn of Miyagi Satoshi’s perspectives as a director of a Japa-

nese *Hamlet* through Mika Elington's interview. A central concern for many theatre artists is how not to allow intercultural theatre to become a danger to itself and other arts, ideologically and artistically. While these are only a few of the artists' statements that might have been included, they display a range of voices, for example, from the viewpoints of Yang, a long-standing director working with major actors in an established company, to that of Ngyugen, a young director working with a range of actors in a brand new group that constituted themselves as a workshop to fly under the radar of the censors.

Videos of some of the works discussed are freely accessible online through a digital archive, Shakespeare Performance in Asia (<http://web.mit.edu/shakespeare/asia>), which is part of MIT Global Shakespeares (<http://globalshakespeares.org>). In my own article I examine this digital project, hosted by MIT and cofounded by Peter Donaldson and myself.

Performance reviews include one on a Bunraku *Tempest*. An exhibit review covers European views of China during the Renaissance, which includes discussion of my curation of videos of Asian Shakespeares. Book reviews (including two on Shakespeare-related books) round out the issue.

While this issue discusses only a small part of the current Shakespeare boom in Asia, it does intimate the geographical spread and the historical sweep that the Bard has inspired. Shakespeare has become a cliché and Asian Shakespeare a paradox in the theatre world—popularized and commercialized to some, yet decided highbrow to others—carrying at once the risk of alienating potential audiences and rich rewards as a site for artistic innovation. This special issue makes the case that the use of the Bard today is often more about the Asian context in which he is produced than about mimicking a European or American model.

In a broader context, I hope this issue will be the beginning of the end for “Asian Shakespeare” as unproductive shorthand. Recognized for its artistic creativity and now established as a field of scholarly inquiry (as demonstrated by faculty positions being advertised and major new publications), Asian Shakespeare seems to have won its battle. However, it remains an ostracizing label, categorizing a group of cultural products that can conveniently be cordoned off. Even though Shakespeare's tragedies, comedies, and history plays undeniably intertwined with the history of many Asian theatrical traditions, Asian Shakespeare does not quite belong to Asian performance studies. On the other hand, though Asian performance idioms are increasingly common in Shakespeare productions both within and beyond Asia, not least the international theatrical avant-garde (Worthen 2003:

117–118), Asian Shakespeare is never fully integrated into the discursive conception of Shakespeare performance. All this can change as primary research materials and knowledge about comparative theatre history become more accessible.

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