

# AND THE ELEMENTS SO MIX'D

## Cross-Cultural Adventures in Shakespeare and Other Stage Productions

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Those who maintain cosmopolitanism are called cosmopolitans, meaning... inhabitants of the world who devote themselves to love for all mankind, transcending the limits of nation, race and religion. Cosmopolitanism was... inspired by literary artists such as Dante of Italy, Cervantes of Spain, [and] William Shakespeare of England. (Chikuro Hiroike, LL.D, *Towards Supreme Morality*, 2002<sup>(2)</sup>)

*cosmopolitan*: familiar with or representative of many different countries and cultures; having an exciting and glamorous character associated with travel and a mixture of cultures. (*Concise O.E.D.*, Oxford, 2006)

'Culture is mix. Culture means a mix of things from other sources.' (Orhan Pamuk, Turkish novelist, Nobel prizewinner 2006<sup>(3)</sup>)

By way of introduction let me give two examples.

First let us take a look at the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1980 production of *Timon of Athens*, directed by Ron Daniels, with the late Richard Pasco in the title role. The play is, of course, written in English, albeit the English of Shakespeare's time in the early seventeenth century, and is set in Athens in the classical Greek period. This was a professional production performed in English in a theatre in England, with an English actor playing Timon.

Now let us move back seven years and consider a production of *The Tempest*, directed by an Englishman, with a twenty-year-old Japanese university student in the title role, performed in fairly primitive conditions on the stage of a university gymnasium in Japan. The text was considerably abbreviated and in some places modernized. The play is set on a remote island with a semi-tropical climate, but most of the principal characters are from Italy, Milan and Naples in particular and all bear Italian names; and the action takes place in the Elizabethan

age, that is, Shakespeare's own time. This was an amateur production performed in English, in Japan, with some Japanese narration spoken by the airy Spirit, Ariel – the one character who appears everywhere on the island and in almost every scene of the play. As a bare minimum, therefore, we have a cross-cultural mix of English, Italian and Japanese strands.

These two productions had several things in common. First and foremost, they had Japanese elements in their overall design. The costumes in both cases had a Japanese flavour. The *Timon* players wore various kimono-style tunics or gowns and Timon himself at one point wore a folded Japanese cotton towel round his head. In the university production of *The Tempest* in Japan, some of the characters wore Japanese style coats and trousers based on those worn by *budo-ka* (players of traditional Japanese sports), especially those worn by karate or judo players – Ariel's was bright red, those worn by four musicians black. There was no attempt in either production to costume all the characters in this way.

Even more visually-striking effects were achieved by the use of Japanese stage properties (more commonly known in theatre jargon as 'props') in both productions. *Timon of Athens* contains one of Shakespeare's most dramatically violent scenes, where Timon, incensed at having been betrayed by his tight-fisted friends whom he has flattered and treated with liberal generosity, invites them to one last banquet, and when they are all seated at the table, has the covered dishes brought in, and then, with the ferocious cry – 'This is Timon's last!' (III.vi.101) – lifts the lids to reveal nothing but steaming hot water, which he then, seething with fury, hurls directly at his guests, scattering them in all directions. This is

sensational enough no matter how it is done, but the touch of genius in this case lay in the director's inspired use of Japanese *nabe* – pottery casserole dishes, which, being extremely brittle, shattered into smithereens as they struck guest, table, chairs and stage floor – an unforgettably powerful theatrical effect. So here we have a noble Athenian, a Greek aristocrat, speaking in English, and chastising his guests with Japanese cooking dishes – surely a truly outstanding case of cross-cultural performance art.

In the university production of *The Tempest*, some equally iconic props were used. Following the custom of Noh drama and some Kabuki performances, four musicians remained kneeling in a row at upper stage right throughout the action. They sometimes stood up to play their instruments, these being a flute (a western-style metal flute was used in place of a bamboo equivalent), a number of *furin* (Japanese wind bells, held high by the player), small hand-drums (each fixed to a wooden handle which when oscillated to-and-fro cause small wooden balls attached to string to strike both sides of it), a miniature *kane* (bowl-like Buddhist brass altar bell on a small cushion struck by a wooden 'hammer'), a large *taiko* (Japanese drum), a traditional dance festival hand gong (a flat brass bowl with a handle struck on its inner surfaces with a metal hammer) and a wooden Japanese watchman's clapper (two pieces of wooden tied end to end with a length of string, and the flat sides struck sharply together). These were used with strange and eerie effect to create telling magical sounds at various points in the action.

Even more strikingly visual was the use of *kyudo yumi* and *ya* (bow and arrow used in traditional Japanese archery). The bow was used by Prospero as his magic staff, and the arrow was used by Ariel to execute the various magical happenings ordered by his master Prospero, thus linking the two in an emotionally-charged master-servant relationship. When at the end of the play, Prospero releases Ariel from the thrall of enchantment, saying,

My Ariel, chick,  
That is thy charge: then to the elements  
Be free, and fare thou well!  
(*The Tempest*, V.i.316-318)

– he gives the bow back to the airy spirit, who

now has total control over Prospero's abjured magical powers. This created a beautiful and perfect emotional ending to the play, which is also said to be, as his last major work, Shakespeare's own farewell to his art as a dramatist.

There was further Japanese imagery in this production of *The Tempest*. Trinculo the King's jester enters carrying a *bangasa* (Japanese oiled-paper and bamboo umbrella), under which he hides to shelter from the storm. A little later, the King's butler Stephano enters drunk on 'sack', sack being a kind of dry white wine. Later, after the island monster Caliban befriends them and also gets drunk on the wine, Stephano has the line,

My man-monster hath drowned his tongue  
in sack.  
(*ibid.* III.ii.14)

– so it was the easiest thing in the world to change this word to *sake* to maintain the Japanese idiom and also get an extra laugh from the audience.

These two vastly different Shakespeare productions remain memorable for their cross-cultural juxtapositioning of English and Japanese elements.

Further examples of Anglo-Japanese cultural 'cross-breeding' can be found in some of the Shakespearean stage productions of the eminent late Japanese director Yukio Ninagawa. In his landmark stagings of *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello* the costumes and set decor were heavily traditional Japanese. Of course, the language used was Japanese but the story and structure followed the Shakespeare original closely. A further traditionally Japanese theatrical custom was applied in his *Macbeth* and *Othello*, in which the heroines Lady Macbeth and Desdemona were played by the famous Kabuki *onnagata* (male actor of female roles) Tamasaburo Bando.

Going off at a tangent for a moment, one could say that one of the great pioneers in Anglo-Japanese cross-cultural performance art was the great film director Akira Kurosawa, whose famous interpretation of *Macbeth* (re-titled *Throne of Blood*

and sometimes *The Castle of the Spider*) with the late Toshiro Mifune in the lead-role, is one of the world's greatest cinematographic masterpieces. Some of the acting in this film draws inspiration from Japanese Noh drama.

Before I leave the arena of Japanese-style Shakespeare, I should mention several other productions which had unique cross-cultural elements. One was a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the year 2000 performed by the same Japanese university group as presented *The Tempest* in 1973, and directed by my nephew Merwyn Torikian. A feature of this staging was that, as with some Ninagawa productions one of the principal female characters, in this case Titania, Queen of the Fairies, was acted by a male student; but a further extension was the fact the Oberon, King of the Fairies, was acted by a female student.

Moving back to England, there was another landmark cross-cultural Shakespeare production, this time of *King Lear*, performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company. In this case the focus was upon the costumes and set, both of which were designed by the famous Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988). In one sense, these were far ahead of their time, and for the most part were roundly abused by the critics of the day. One wrote of Lear as having 'around his face a vast drooping circlet of white horse hair, on his head what seemed to be an inverted hat-stand'. Another spoke of the women characters 'hideously dressed, while the men wear deck-tennis rings for hats and variations on the cellular bath-mats over space-suits in heavy leather'. There were many allusions to space-fiction in their notices. This choice of decor was, however, deliberate, and a programme note stated 'Our object in this production has been to find a setting and costumes which would be free of historical and decorative associations, so that the timeless, universal, and mythical quality of the story may be clear.' Unfortunately, the Noguchi set and costumes were so radical and outlandish that they 'interfered with the attention of the audience instead of concentrating it on the text and the performance', as critic Ivor Brown (1891-1974) put it (*Shakespeare*

*Memorial Theatre 1954-56, A Photographic Record*, Max Reinhardt, London, 1956). The performers themselves also complained that the costumes were difficult to act in, and it seems that only the genius of Sir John Gielgud (1904~2000) as Lear was able to overcome this handicap. I myself was not able to see this performance, but photographs of the production struck my then teenage-eyes as simply amazing and were a strong influence on me when I directed the play in Japan twenty years later.

This 1975 production of *King Lear*, performed by Reitaku University English Drama Group, as were the previous two university productions mentioned earlier, again contained cross-cultural elements. All the sound effects were created by a Japanese drum and bamboo flute, the former for the thunder of the storm scenes and the latter as a symbol of Lear's increasing madness. The main feature of the set, a huge black moon or sun, with a light behind it illuminating the cyclorama, loomed over the action, and served as a symbol of the disruptions of nature occurring and mentioned in the play. Lear's faithful supporter, the Earl of Gloucester, refers to these thus:

These late eclipses of the sun and moon  
portend no good to us: though the wisdom  
of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet  
nature finds itself scourged by the sequent  
effects.

(*King Lear*, I.ii.115-118)

The use of this black disk was certainly a cross-cultural adventure of a kind. I several times travelled by Shinkansen (the Bullet Express) between Tokyo and Osaka, and in those days there was a restaurant car in every train, with a long corridor running down one side of the carriage. On the wall at the end of the corridor was a light of unique design – a black disk with the illumination shining from behind its circumference. This directly inspired the use of the black sun/moon in that 1975 *King Lear*!

Another kind of cross-cultural adventure was the staging of Shakespeare plays in English in a traditional Japanese Kabuki theatre. I have directed three plays in this way – *Macbeth* in 1993 and *Hamlet* in 1997 and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, all of them

performed in Uchiko-za, the fully-equipped Kabuki theatre in Uchiko Town, Ehime Prefecture. One might call this kind of experimentation a form of sacrilegious misuse, but it is surprising how well some of Shakespeare's plays suit the idiom of Kabuki drama. Revenge tragedies and love-triangle problems exist in both dramatic traditions. Ghost dramas are also common to both. The multiple trapdoors and the revolving stage were used to good effect to present the ghosts in both Shakespeare tragedies, and the apparitions in *Macbeth*. The Ghost of Hamlet's father was acted by two players in identical costumes, one sinking slowly through one trapdoor, the other rising suddenly from another trapdoor a split second later, only to appear almost as immediately on one of the balconies! For *Macbeth*, the *hana-michi* made an excellent ramp for the arrival of Macduff's army disguised with trees from Birnam Forest. Shifting from Shakespeare awhile, in 1998 the S.E.E.D.S. group (See Note 1) performed the Sophocles masterpiece *Oedipus the King* in English in the same theatre, and here again the *hana-michi* and revolving stage were used to create both awe-inspiring and beautiful slow-moving entrance, exit and tableau effects.

One other English-Japanese cross-cultural Shakespeare production might be mentioned here – a rendering of *Hamlet* as an English-language Noh drama. The Japanese poet-professor-actor Munakata Ueda created the world's first English Shakespeare Noh play in the Japanese traditional Noh style in English in 1982. He played the *shite* (main role) at performances in Tokyo. I myself saw this performance and although there were moments where I could appreciate what Ueda was trying to achieve, I did not feel that he fully succeeded. Somehow, to hear the 'To be, or not to be' phrase and other parts of this famous speech repeated again and again almost defeated its own musical effect and bordered on the ridiculous. This is not to condemn such worthy efforts, which in most cases I would strongly support.

All these examples of Anglo-Japanese Shakespearean stage productions go to show that such cross-cultural experimentation has produced a rich and wonderful harvest of artistic originality.

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Another thing we need to remember here is that in Shakespeare's time the plays he wrote were acted for the most part in the costumes of the day, that is to say, Elizabethan costumes, the men in doublet and hose and wearing large lace ruffs round their necks. This means they were acting onstage in modern dress. The common custom in modern times of acting many Shakespearean plays in traditional Elizabethan dress is of course faithful to the image of Shakespeare's time, but it is not faithful to practice of those times.

Some of the earliest twentieth-century so-called Modern-Dress Shakespeare productions were, predictably, sensational, and inspired dramatic reactions, both favourable and unfavourable. The very first of these was Shakespeare's late romance *Cymbeline* in 1923, directed by the famous theatrical pioneer Sir Barry Jackson (1879-1961), founder the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, breeding ground of the twentieth century's six greatest actors – Laurence Olivier, John Gielgud, Ralph Richardson, Paul Scofield, Albert Finney and Derek Jacobi and of the famous director Peter Brook. *Cymbeline* was followed by equally epoch-making Barry Jackson productions of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. In those days, a common article of dress worn by men was the distinctive semi-formal style of trousers usually made of Scottish tweed and known as plus-fours – a type of knee breeches with baggy overlaps hanging well below the knees, and so named because they need an extra four inches of cloth to produce a single pair. As a result, Barry Jackson's pioneering modern-dress productions were dubbed, somewhat derisively, but quite honestly, as 'Shakespeare in plus fours' – a temporal cross-cultural nomination par excellence!

Nowadays, modern-dress Shakespeare productions are two a penny, almost too commonplace to mention. A famous example in Japan is Norio Deguchi's series of Shakespeare productions staged by his Shakespeare Theatre from 1975 to 1981. These also bore the somewhat mocking name of

'Shakespeare in jeans and T-shirts'. Since Barry Jackson's day there has been an extraordinary flowering of cross-cultural costuming, so that we could see a Nazi-style *Coriolanus* or a multi-media television-news style of *Antony & Cleopatra*. Many of the plays produced in the BBC TV Shakespeare series from 1978 to 1985 had Flemish settings with costumes reminiscent of the seventeenth paintings of Rembrandt or Vermeer. Virtually anything is possible. The interchanges between nationalities and time frames are without limit.

Following the *avant garde* designs of Isamu Noguchi's 1955 *King Lear*, we might well have a production of *The Tempest* set on the planet Mars, with the actors in spacesuits confronting alien creatures and species already there. Likewise we could have a *Julius Caesar* set on the Planet of the Apes, or a *Macbeth* set in the ruins of Delphi, or a *Henry V* with an Arabic setting, with the young, courageous King on a camel in flowing Lawrence of Arabia robes.

This is an enormous subject, reaching in every direction to the very furthest ends of the earth, and when one thinks that at every single moment in every twenty-four hour span of time, a performance or performances of *Hamlet*, are in progress somewhere in the world, we can see that it is virtually impossible to catalogue or describe or even mention all the 'infinite variety' of cross-cultural Shakespeare productions that have been performed and are being performed at this very moment, and are likely to be performed in the future. In the year 2016, the 400th Anniversary of the Bard's death was observed and involved a veritable orgy of Shakespeare production across the globe. In fact, almost two years earlier starting on Shakespeare's birthday on 23rd April, 2014, the Royal Shakespeare Company embarked on a mammoth tour of its production of *Hamlet*, to visit every single one of the 205 countries of the world, which was completed two years later.

Considering the vast scope of the theme, if I may, I would like to confine the remaining pages of this essay to a number of cross-cultural adventures in stage productions I myself have directed or

supervised. In my own little world of theatre, I have frequently 'stolen' ideas and designs from productions I have seen on stage, on film, or in photographs and paintings. When I directed *The Tempest* in 1973 with Reitaku University English drama Group, described at the very beginning of this essay, I had recently seen on its world tour in Tokyo Peter Brook's landmark 1970 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which made use of a plain white hollow box set, with players ascending and descending on circus-like trapezes. For the magic flower, Puck and Oberon used wooden sticks with a metal plate spinning on one and now the other – leading, I now recognize, to our use of a plain white wooden box to symbolize Prospero's magic island, and our use of bow and arrow to symbolize the relationship between Prospero and Ariel. The same Peter Brook production probably influenced our production of *Macbeth* the year before in 1972, in which the only set used was three thick gymnasium ropes hanging from the stage flies. The three Witches used these at the very beginning of the play to swing wildly from the wings onto the stage, and later the ropes were used in other ways, for example – by the Murderers to strangle Banquo, and sometimes simply as entrance doorways. This was also a modern-dress production. Because of budgetary restrictions in those days, all the main male characters wore black university uniforms (then still worn for daily use by the majority of undergraduates) with their brass buttons and university badges removed, and differences in status indicated by coloured ribbons attached to them. When *Macbeth* became king, he wore (ironically perhaps) the black commoner's gown I used as a student at Oxford. All the other costumes were black to match the uniforms and give the whole production a visual consistency.

When Paul Scofield acted *Lear* in Peter Brook's stunning 1962 production, which I was lucky enough to see on stage, he was short haired and his beard was not obtrusive. This gave the character an image of dynamic masculinity and physical vitality far removed from the traditionally long white-haired and bearded *Lear*, an effect that was quite lost in the film version where Scofield sported a copious bushy beard that completely masked his steely-sinewed face. In

1974, therefore, having seen the superbly powerful monochrome Soviet Russian film of *King Lear* directed by Grigori Kozintsev with a beardless Yuri Yarvet in the title role, I decided that in our forthcoming production of the same play the actor playing Lear would also be clean-shaven. I saw that an actor's facial features and bone structure are given greater prominence and nobility if the actor is beardless. This is a case where an English director working with Japanese students in English was cross-culturally influenced by a Russian director and actor acting Shakespeare in Russian.

I have been involved with two productions of Shakespeare with Chinese characteristics. In 1995 when Reitaku University Drama Group was to present *Julius Caesar* under the direction of my nephew Merwyn Torikian, I suggested they attempt to give it a modern Chinese slant, based on the Mao Zedong era, so Mao-style uniform tunics were worn by many of the characters, and as this was clearly a modern-dress production, I suggested that Caesar who was deaf in his left ear—

Come on my right hand, for this ear is deaf.  
(*Julius Caesar*, I.ii.212)

— might wear a battery-operated hearing aid, and for this purpose loaned for the occasion an old hearing device I no longer used.

Eight years later, set a production of *The Comedy of Errors* in a classical Chinese period, with Solinus, the Duke of Ephesus (note here, a Turkish aristocrat, rare in Shakespeare), renamed Lord Gong, Governor of Shanghai, attired in the imperial yellow of a Chinese emperor. The comedy revolves round repeated occurrences of mistaken identity involving two pairs of twins who were geographically separated as infants, and grew up in different cities, in the original play Ephesus in Turkey and Syracuse in Sicily, but in our version (performed by the Meitoku International Players in 2003) Shanghai and somewhere in Mongolia. The action works equally well no matter where it is set. As an added cross-cultural touch, the narration for this production was performed by girls impersonating a pair of famous, recently deceased Japanese twins known as Kin-san and Gin-san who lived till the ages of 107 and 108

respectively and at the age of 100 recorded a rap album which reached a high level in the charts it was so popular. They sat on large cushions at one side of the stage, laughing frequently in high cackling voices just like the loveable Kin-san and Gin-san.

Two other examples where I used Japanese characters to provide narration was, firstly, in *The Winter's Tale*, performed by Reitaku University English Drama Group in 1981. Here a Japanese mother told the story to her two young children while all three sat in a *kotatsu* (foot warmer) on a cold winter's evening; and the second in Meitoku International Players' performance of the same play, where two Japanese drunkards narrated the story between them as they staggered home on a cold winter's evening. Both of these narrative devices served to explain the play's title, as there is nothing in the play about winter, and the second half is clearly set in the summer or early autumn season.

I have always been fond of classical Greek tragedy and have directed half a dozen productions using the traditional Chorus, with highly stylized movements and chanting. When I came to direct Shakespeare's early tragedy *Titus Andronicus* in 1993, its atmosphere of unrelieved tragedy from beginning to end, in which no less than seventeen characters are murdered or die in hideous conditions, gave me the idea to present it with Japanese narration by a Greek-style Chorus. This added extraordinary power and discipline to a drama which is otherwise so preposterously melodramatic that it can provoke unintended laughter or scornful dismissal as bathos. So there we have another curious cross-cultural mix — a Shakespearean tragedy set in ancient Rome, acted in both English and Japanese, with Japanese university students, and using a classical Greek-style Chorus for narration. Quite an adventure that turned out to be. It is possible that I was influenced by a production of *Macbeth* by another distinguished Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki, which I saw in Tokyo in 1992 and which made use of an unforgettably powerful groaning Greek-style chorus of fictitious cult members who symbolized 'sickness' and so tried to infect Macbeth's mind. Suzuki has directed many other productions with such radically

cross-cultural overtones, and one wonders whether there was any interplay of influence between him and the English-speaking director (the Ron Daniels I mentioned earlier) of an extraordinary Romanian production of *Titus Andronicus* which I saw at the Tokyo Globe in 1992, in which Titus appears in the later scenes in a wheel-chair, which again might have influenced Suzuki's production of *King Lear* in 2005 in which Lear first appears in a wheel-chair in a lunatic asylum. The Romanian production also included an unnamed character occasionally slowly crossing the stage with long drawn-out cries of pain, which might possibly have been inspired by Suzuki's groaning chorus in *Macbeth*. Such is the highly complex nature of theatrical cross-cultural influence.

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I will now shift the emphasis to a few cross-cultural forays into the world of non-Shakespearean production. In 2011, it was decided that I would direct the Meitoku International Players in an adaptation of a famous Kabuki play *Kanjincho*, about the priest Benkei's skillful tactics to save the life of his master Yoshitsune who was escaping from the wrath of his brother Yoritomo, and how he overcame the suspicions of the frontier overlord Togashi. I was faced with a major cross-cultural challenge. The big question was: how to do this play in English? The Kabuki style of acting and stage layout are highly stylized and impossible to reproduce using English. The traditional costumes used for this play are based on those of the original Noh play from which the Kabuki adaptation was first made, so these would seem very unnatural if the play was presented in a realistic way with a Japanese setting. It seemed to me that there was only one way to achieve the cultural changeover – transcribe the entire story into a European setting, change the Buddhist element into a Christian element and give the story a simplified Shakespearean structure and tone. I set my version in Italy, with the fugitive lord trying to cross the border into France. I renamed all the characters with 'Shakespearean'-sounding names, some of them based on actual or near translations of the original Japanese names. Thus main character Benkei, the actual meaning of whose name contains some elements of

the phrase 'to speak well', became Benedict, which is derived from two Latin words meaning 'good' and 'speak, namely 'speak well'; so the two names were very close in meaning. The Japanese name Togashi, the keeper of the barrier at Ataka, has elements which mean 'wealth' and 'evergreen oak tree'; the word 'gold' is often associated with wealth and the oak tree is one of the most English of trees, so the new English name 'Goldenoak' evolved. Togashi's given name was 'Saemon' so this was transcribed into an English name very near it into sound – 'Simon', so the Togashi Saemon's full name in English became Sir Simon Goldenoak. Using the same process, the name Yoshitsune, which has elements meaning 'justice' became Justinian in my adaptation. There are very faint aural and syllabic similarities between the two names – Yoritomo and Yoshitsune on one side, and Juliano and Justinian on the other. All the Buddhist element and abstruse detail which Benkei was obliged to explain to Togashi to prove that he was a genuine priest, was transcribed into the complexities of Christian lore and jargon along with a deep knowledge of the Bible. All in all, the transcription from the Japanese Buddhist cultural base to a European Christian was unexpectedly successful. I have described this production in thus much detail to show how cross-cultural adaptations can be made, even though some of the transitions are hardly more than superficial. The superficiality doesn't really matter if the full suspense of the drama is recaptured in the new idiom, which certainly was the case with our English *Kanjincho*, parts of which were aired on NHK local TV news.

Another play which I wrote and directed for the Meitoku International Players was *East, West, Home's Best – John Manjiro in America*. Nakahama Manjiro was probably the first truly international Japanese, certainly the first to live in the United States for a number of years. He is now generally known by the

name he was given aboard Captain Whitfield's whaling ship – John Manjiro, or sometimes John Mung. The name John Manjiro itself has an immediate cross-cultural colour, and his adventures as a boy and young man, and his later travels abroad are full of the problems and fascinations of cultural differences, and the play was presented with scenes in which both English and Japanese are spoken. The story itself involves the encounter of radically different civilizations, and how goodwill between human beings can lead to better international peace and understanding. Descendants of the Nakahama and Whitfield families, now six generations later, are still good friends and meet regularly.

In 1992, I both wrote and staged a play with inter-cultural connections entitled *The Vulgar Saint* – a documentary drama on the life Saint Jerome, the Italian priest who first translated the Bible into Latin, an enormous personal undertaking which had far-reaching influence the propagation of Christianity throughout Europe and the world at large. So here was story about an Italian who was closely linked to classical Italian and Greek civilizations, dramatized and directed in English by an Englishman, acted by Japanese university students in Tokyo on International Translation Day, also the feast-day of St. Jerome, on 30 September. Parts of this play were shown on the national NHK TV news that evening.

During the eight years I lived in Ehime Prefecture I worked on three stage productions with people living in the small rural town of Hijikawa. None of them had any experience with acting, either in Japanese or English yet they willingly got together to stage, firstly, a play based on the *Kojiki*, the earliest chronicle of Japanese 'Ancient Matters', covering various early mythological episodes related to the foundation of Japan, including the misbehaviour of Susano-no-Mikoto, the brother of Amaterasu, Goddess of the Sun. In our version of the story entitled *From Heaven to Hijikawa*, when Susano-o was exiled from Heaven, he didn't descend to Izumo in Shimane Prefecture. Instead, he thought he was being sent Hell, but confused the Japanese word 'jigoku' meaning 'hell' with the name of the island of 'Shikoku' and so arrived in a narrow valley in Hijikawa Town,

where there actually is a shrine called the 'Eight Dragons Shrine', which we linked with the eight-headed dragon Yamata-no-Orochi mentioned in the original *Kojiki* legend. This play was performed in English in the autumn of 1995. It was an extraordinary cultural shock for everyone concerned including myself. A year earlier no one could have imagined a play based on ancient Japanese mythology could be performed in English in a tiny community in the heart of Japan's countryside.

The following year another Japanese-English cross-cultural adventure was embarked upon by members of the same Hijikawa English Study Group. This time they performed Shakespeare's ever-popular comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. One of the actors was a mushroom farmer, who wrote out his lines on a big wooden board and displayed them near his mushroom racks so that he could memorize his lines while working. Local TV-media people had got to know about what we were doing, and a TV documentary was filmed about the making of this English Shakespeare production in a Japanese country town. This film was aired nationally in 1997, and won an award, resulting in its being reissued in an English-language version and exported overseas!

Later that year, 1997, another Japanese theme was chosen, this time the popular children's tale *Momotaro*, about the little boy who emerged from an outside peach floating down the river and discovered by an old couple. One feature of this English-language production was that three of the characters were acted by three generations of a single Japanese family. The baby peach-boy was acted by a seven-year-old primary-school girl, the adult Momotaro was acted by her father, and his father acted one of the ferocious demons, a Red Oni! This too attracted the attention of the media and parts of it were aired on the local NHK TV news.

I will now conclude with one more non-Shakespearean cross-cultural production which seems extremely apt and satisfying as an artistic concept. In 2002, the Meitoku International Players staged four stories from *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer. Almost everyone knows that the

framework of this pioneering work in English Literature is based on the idea of a group of Christian pilgrims travelling from London to do homage at the tomb of Saint Thomas à Becket in Canterbury Cathedral, a distance of some eighty-seven kilometres. Before leaving London, they decided that while they made the journey on foot and on horseback, taking several days, each of them would tell a story – to make the trip seem shorter and so lightening the burden of the journey itself.

Now, it so happens that in Shikoku there is a famous Buddhist pilgrimage known as *henro*. For this, Japanese pilgrims make a circuit of the island visiting the eighty-eight temples founded by the eighth-century Japanese monk Kukai, also known as Kobo Daishi. Meitoku Gijuku is a school in Shikoku and *henro* pilgrims are often seen passing by, interestingly most often during the spring months of March and April, which coincides with the timing of the Canterbury Pilgrims. Chaucer's fourteenth-century poem begins with the lines, in modern English, 'When the sweet showers of April have moistened the thirsty roots of March...then people long to go on pilgrimages.' What could be more natural than to have the Japanese narrators of our English-language production dressed in the white gowns and straw hats of the *henro* pilgrims? They were not travelling from London to Canterbury but making the round of the eighty-eight Shikoku temples, and telling stories to each other on the way. Though I myself say it, this might be called a stroke of cross-cultural genius – a perfect mix of western and oriental religious traditions in a dramatic and poetic literary idiom.

And so, in our ever-shrinking international world, the cross-cultural pageant continues.

**NOTE:**

The title of this essay is derived from Mark Antony's last speech, about Brutus, in *Julius Caesar*. See V.v.73-74.

- (1) Gavin Bantock was General Director of Reitaku University English Drama Group (R.U.E.D.G.) from 1969 to 1994, and has been its General Advisor since 1994. From 1993 to 2018 was Director of the Meitoku International Players at Meitoku-Gijuku High School, in Kochi; he is now Advisor & Senior Director. From 1995 to 2002 he was Director of the Hijikawa English Study Group, and from 1996 to 2003 Director of the South Ehime English Drama Society (S.E.E.D.S.).
- (2) Chikuro Hiroike, LL.D, *Towards Supreme Morality, An Attempt to Establish the New Science of Moralogy*, Vol.II, 113), (The Institute of Moralogy, 2002). The original Japanese version was published in 1928.
- (3) Orhan Pamuk – Interview. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Prize Outreach AB 2022. Tue. 15 Nov 2022. [www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2006/pamuk/interview/](http://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2006/pamuk/interview/)