

Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance
vol. 11 (26), 2014; DOI: 10.2478/mstap-2014-0001

Ann Thompson*

Foreword

By you being pardoned, we commit no crime
To use one language in each several clime
Where our scenes seem to live.
(*Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, Act 4, Scene 4)

Gower's apology that the characters in *Pericles* continue to speak in English while the narrative of the play shifts from one country to another is a rare acknowledgement of a convention that is usually taken for granted in Early Modern drama (and a belated one in the context of the play, coming as it does at the beginning of what is traditionally designated Act 4, scene 4). Claims for the 'universality' of Shakespeare may seem to rest on a similar assumption: that he can 'speak' to the whole world in his own language (English) and be understood. Claims for a 'multicultural' Shakespeare, on the other hand, assert the possibility of a plurality of forms of cultural expression, including a plurality of languages.

Plurality was certainly on offer to Anglophone audiences in 2012 when I signed up for a 'heptathlon' ticket for the Globe's version of the Shakespeare Olympics, meaning that I saw seven productions over the course of six weeks in an unusually cold, wet Spring. It rained virtually every time, but that didn't depress the spirits of the actors who had travelled from countries such as Afghanistan, Georgia, Lithuania and South Sudan to present their work on the Globe stage. Nor did it inhibit the audiences. Indeed one of the greatest pleasures of the Globe to Globe Festival was experiencing the shows with such diverse companions; I was surprised when for the first production I saw, the Russian *Measure for Measure*, the Globe seemed to be filled with Russian speakers, but something similar happened every time: publicity for the festival had clearly reached the appropriate London communities and they turned out in force and reacted enthusiastically. Even when the production seemed to me less than brilliant, there was a palpable sense of warmth and pride in the house: 'This is our language; these are our actors; this is our Shakespeare.'

The shows themselves were naturally very diverse too, some of them being 'classic' or 'vintage' productions that had already played for several years

* Emeritus Professor, King's College London.

to other audiences, like the Lithuanian *Hamlet* which had been touring the world since 1997, whereas many others were specially commissioned for the Festival. One show, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* from Zimbabwe, had been previously seen in London performed in English but was translated into Shona for its presentation at the Globe. The range of playing styles was exhilarating, and the decision by the Globe to provide scene-by-scene synopses as surtitles worked well to allow people ignorant of the language or of the play (or both) to follow what was going on. Clearly, many companies worked in their own local or topical references and jokes: I was frequently baffled by delighted laughter which did not seem to be triggered by anything I knew of the plays in English. Of course regular London audiences are familiar with Shakespeare being performed in foreign languages, thanks to the regular presentations by Yukio Ninagawa and other overseas companies at the Barbican (Ninagawa's *Cymbeline* coincided with but was not part of the Globe to Globe Festival) and to the work of Declan Donnellan of *Cheek by Jowl* with Russian actors such as the 2003 *Twelfth Night*. But the Festival gave us a real feast of 'foreign Shakespeare' over a short period of time.

What however does it mean for an Anglophone Shakespeare scholar to attend performances in languages he or she does not understand? Are such performances really intended for me at all and do I judge them as I would judge performances in English? Outside of the Globe to Globe Festival, I have been fortunate to have seen many productions of 'foreign Shakespeare,' some of them performed on their native soil during international Shakespeare conferences: I recall, for example, a very impressive *Henry IV* (both parts compressed into a single play) performed in Czech at Prague Castle during the World Shakespeare Congress in 2011, a fascinating Chinese operatic version of *The Merchant of Venice* in Taipei during a conference of the National Taiwan University Shakespeare Festival in 2010, and, on the down side, some extremely long (and frankly self-indulgent) German productions in Bochum during the meeting of the German Shakespeare Society in 2000. Sometimes, in the absence of surtitles, one has to work hard to follow a particular pattern of cutting or interpretation: I was surprised that the Czech *Henry IV* omitted to stage the battle of Shrewsbury and the death of Hotspur, and the representation of Shylock as a Saracen rather than a Jew in Taipei implied a different range of historical and cultural references. One can perhaps recognize and admire great acting, but I would hesitate to comment in any detail on productions when there are so many aspects of them I simply can't appreciate.

In the case of filmed Shakespeare, it is sometimes said that adaptations in other languages (Russian, for example, or Japanese) can be more successful because they are freed from what in that medium seems to be the burden of the original language, and on stage many foreign productions use translations into contemporary vernacular prose rather than attempting any equivalent of archaic

verse forms. I understand that the Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, Oregon, has been given some funds to commission writers to translate some of Shakespeare's plays into modern English, an experiment that many will deplore but which I think could be interesting and valuable, so long as it did not replace performances in the original. We are, after all, used to attending modern translations of the Greek dramatists and of Moliere, Ibsen and Strindberg, so why not Shakespeare? Any translation would have to stand on its own (British theatre companies often employ playwrights and poets to turn basic or literal translations into more 'literary' works), and we might learn something about how 'foreign' Shakespeare can be even to English speakers. I spend much of my time as an editor, and indeed as a teacher, trying to unpack the density of Shakespeare's original language and it can be salutary to be reminded that Anglophone audiences do not necessarily have better access to Shakespeare than foreign ones.