

# Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance

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## Theatre Reviews

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## Theatre Reviews

***A Floresta que Anda (The Moving Forest)*. Dir. Christiane Jatahy. Teatro Nacional Dona Maria II, Lisbon, Portugal.**

Reviewed by **Francesca Rayner\***

In Act 5 Scene 5 of *Macbeth*, a startled Messenger informs Macbeth: “As I did stand my watch upon the hill / I looked toward Birnam and anon methought / The wood began to move” (5.5.32-34). Hearing this, Macbeth realizes that his sense of infallibility is misplaced: “If this which he avouches does appear, / There is nor flying hence nor tarrying here” (5.5.46-47). In Christiane Jatahy’s adaptation, Birnam Wood morphed into a technological forest and the fear that Macbeth senses when it comes towards him created the basis for a collective challenge to the global disorders unleashed by very contemporary tyrants.

When the audience entered the performance space, there were no comfortable seats from which to watch the tragedy of *Macbeth* unfold. Instead, the audience climbed onto the stage itself, where there were four viewing screens and a bar in the corner. The screens projected the stories of four individuals: Igor, a Brazilian political prisoner, Michele, a working-class Brazilian black woman who saw her uncle murdered by the police in a Rio de Janeiro slum, Aboud, a refugee from the Syrian civil war currently living in Germany, and Prosper, a war refugee from the Congo now living in São Paulo, Brazil. These stories of political persecution and exile were not filmed in conventional documentary style. While the characters narrated their experiences to camera, the visual images focused not on their faces but on fragments of arms, legs, eyes, tables, parakeets, flights of stairs. Their testimonies were interspersed with apparently random comments by mothers, friends and children who strayed into the film. Audience members chose how long they stayed with each of these stories and in which order. They could supplement the viewing with visits to the bar or engage in private conversations.

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Some of the members of the audience had been given headsets through which the absent director gave instructions during the performance. While the testimonies in the video installation continued, verbal instructions were relayed to these men and women who played out a series of micro-performances at the bar. These included a man putting his hand greedily into an abandoned black handbag and then removing the hand covered in blood, a woman washing away the blood on her hands in an aquarium full of water and a man attempting to give away money covered in blood to other members of the audience. In these examples of what Jatahy has referred to as ‘invisible performance’, the stories were almost imperceptible to those members of the audience who were not wearing headsets, and even those wearing them probably missed some of them. The combination of video installations and micro-performances updated but also fragmented *Macbeth* into a series of apparently random events around the themes of murder, corruption and ambition, rather than engaging in a linear retelling of the story.

Suddenly, the four screens came together into a long line as images of hybrid insects, animals and skeletons were projected onto this extended screen. Then, to everyone’s surprise, the screens started moving towards the audience, forcing them back towards the bar. As members of the audience read excerpts from *Macbeth*, the images on the screens became those of the audience itself, who had been filmed in real time throughout the performance. What had seemed then playful experiments in audience participation now became compromising footage of complicity in the bloody story of a tyrant and the elimination of those standing in his way. Particularly forceful in this respect were the filmed attempts of one of the men mentioned above to give away the money covered in blood. Members of the audience who had accepted the director’s instructions as part of the game of performance figured, under the scrutiny of the filmed footage, as unscrupulous in the extreme, while those who had spent their time simply watching the performances at the bar were cast as unwilling witnesses.

With the audience still reeling from their casting within rather than outside *Macbeth*, an actress narrated a series of statistics about global war and tyranny to contextualize the individual stories on the screens. These ranged from the fact that one adolescent dies every hour in Brazil to the innumerable victims of war and mineral exploitation in the Congo. These global stories of births and deaths ended with the birth of the current Brazilian President Michel Temer, whose undemocratic impeachment of his predecessor, Dilma Rousseff, and constant dodging of charges of corruption made him a very contemporary Macbeth figure. The actress then asked a member of the audience to read with her the exchange between the Messenger and Macbeth in 5.5 about the approach of Birnam Wood. She ended her intervention with the question “How do we change things?” and indicated that the moment when Macbeth learns about the approach of Birnam Wood and first senses his own fear is a pivotal moment in

the play and in forging an opposition to the various social, political and ecological catastrophes that characterize the world at the moment. As the screens moved forward towards the audience once again, they dared the audience to retreat or stand their ground. As such, the moving technological forest represented not only the encroachment of political reaction on private and public, local and global spaces, but also the force of a possible resistance to that encroachment by a newly-energized collective made conscious of its power.

The performance ended as it began, with the four stories once more looping on the individual screens. This circular ending was undercut, however, by the lights coming up on the director and her camera crew behind a mirror by the bar, deconstructing the illusion which the performance had itself created. The audience decided whether to watch the testimonies again or leave the theatre. Personally, I found that watching the images had become intolerable by this time and left the theatre almost immediately. In the Q and A session after the performance, Jatahy cast herself and her camera crew as contemporary witches, provoking the audience into behaving in ways they might not outside the theatre and then making them responsible for their actions on camera.

There have been many performances of *Macbeth* in recent years, reflecting the general political atmosphere of war and terror. However, this performance stood out for me in its implication of the complicity of those who witness or take part in such events and in its call for urgent social, political and theatrical transformation.



Courtesy of Christiane Jatahy and the Teatro Nacional Dona Maria II.  
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Courtesy of Christiane Jatahy and the Teatro Nacional Dona Maria II.  
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***Romeo and Juliet*. Dir. Jenny Sealey. Graeae Theatre Company, United Kingdom, in association with the National Theatre of Dhaka, Bangladesh.**

Reviewed by *Arnab Chatterjee*\*

**“[A Different] *Romeo and Juliet*”: Staging Shakespeare in Bangladesh**

William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* has been performed endlessly on the stage and in motion pictures. In Jenny Sealey’s radical re-enactment of the story in her “[A Different] *Romeo and Juliet*” the play was performed by an entire troupe of differently abled people from Bangladesh, with little or no access to the study of the Shakespearean canon. Sealey explains how she had to battle linguistic as well as other related barriers with the troupe to stage one of the most performed plays of the Bard. A part of an initiative of the British Council, Graeae Theatre Company and the National Theatre of Dhaka, the play was an effort to fight off the marginalization of disabled people in Bangladesh and the stigma associated with them. Graeae Theatre Company, based in London and founded in 1980, has been in the creative process of bringing in marginalized and disabled actors on the stage and thereby battling audience preoccupations as regards disability and any other form of bodily deformity. Sealey’s seventy-five-minute play was an effort to make Shakespeare more accessible to the masses, to create a counter-discourse of resistance to the oppressive politics applied on this ‘Other’. Thus, the play by Sealey addresses the question of marginality vis-à-vis the politics and the related mechanics of exclusion connected with the dramatization of a canonical writer on stage and his subsequent reception.

“[A Different] *Romeo and Juliet*” was an attempt by Jenny Sealey to stage Shakespeare’s classic love tale while working with a group of differently abled but talented young boys and girls in Bangladesh. Such an experiment had never been attempted before at the Dhaka National Theatre, and Sealey, the founder of Graeae Theater Company, in collaboration with Nasiruddin Yousuff, attempted an experiment on a scale perhaps not reached before. Funded by the British Council, the goal of the project was to bring these talented but differently abled people on the stage in a country where disability is shunned, depriving disabled people of any purpose in their lives. The play was staged in 2016 as part of the celebrations of the 400<sup>th</sup> death anniversary of the Bard. Thus, the primary question that can be raised vis-à-vis the staging of the play is its reception by the audience and how this politics of exclusion of the ‘Other’ was deconstructed by the inclusion of handicapped players. The re-enactment of

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*Romeo and Juliet* by physically challenged players is one of the many ways in which a counter-discourse of the staging of the play as an adaptation was created. This is particularly important keeping in mind that, in a country like Bangladesh, physical deformities are looked down upon and often attributed to religious reasons, excluding disabled people from collective activities.

Sealey's experience during the staging of the play is worth noting. Initially, she had a tough time acquainting the crew with a play generally performed within an Anglophone setting and in a language that is not the official language of Bangladesh. The players had a difficult period wondering if they would be well received after acting in one of the most discussed of the Bard's plays at the National Theatre in Dhaka, the capital city of the country and a high-brow place of local intellectual tradition. Coupled with this were concerns regarding the radical re-enactment of Shakespeare's play with recourse to different physical, linguistic and cultural possibilities in the Bangladeshi setting. The first challenge that Sealey had to face was language. Many of the people in the troupe admitted that it was an altogether different experience for them, and that they even feared failure on the 'big day'. Along with such issues, there were audience expectations vis-à-vis the adaptation of a 'canonical' text that had to be transmitted by the narrative strategies that govern differently abled people in day-to-day life. Thus, the questions that were of paramount importance were how an adaptation can strive to create a different cultural discourse of its own and yet, at the same time, not go outside the 'adaptation continuum', a parameter that has been already pointed out.

Sealey, along with her group, auditioned hundreds of young people in Bangladesh. The BRAC funded the auditions that took place in a small town called Savar, very near the capital city of Dhaka. Sealey was assisted by the sign language interpreter Jeni Draper, and they were joined by people who were meticulously chosen for their unique way of responding to situations in real life despite being physically challenged. For instance, Lady Capulet was played by Parvin, a homemaker with house organizing qualities. She was considered to be more attuned to the role of Lady Capulet, who has a wide range of ideas as to what is good for her daughter and what is not. Sadam, who walked on all fours owing to a severe disability that did not allow him to stand, played the role of Mercutio. Montague was played by Sajal, a little older than most of the troupe members, a calm and graceful person, the leader of his house. Shakila and Sriti played the role of Juliet, as one of them was flirtatious in everyday life and the other one had been in love and was therefore more suitable for the role of a romantic heroine.

The script was prepared both in the native Bengali and in English. Yet, as one of the troupe members pointed out as regards the problems of staging a foreign play in a non-Anglophone setting:

One of the hardest aspects of *Romeo and Juliet* is that it is written in a foreign language. I mean, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is in a language that is foreign to us. Translating that from Shakespeare's language into historical Bengali vocabulary is a tough job which we don't really understand these days. ('Video')

As regards the issue with some troupe members with hearing impairment, sign language was used, and, after the play was enthusiastically received, Sealey talked with the spectators and the reporters via signs (as she is deaf herself) coupled with actual speech.

The issue of the politics of exclusion of the 'Other' caused many problems to the staging of the play –not only the setting in which Shakespeare was to be performed, but also the level of education of the troupe members. Unlike India, where the physically challenged even have job reservations, in countries like Bangladesh these people lack education, and the stigma of being physically challenged is endured by many of them in day-to-day life. Instances may be provided by the performers themselves: One of the physically challenged actors reported that, during a trip to a town called Narshindi, he was allotted a seat near a man who objected to this and shouted to the bus conductor to complain and change his seat. To this, he was plainly told that physically challenged people were humans as well and that the proposed change of seat was out of the question. In a similar vein, one of the disabled female troupe members once went to a marriage party and was not let in, because her disability could supposedly bring ill luck to the lives of the bride and groom.

As regards the reception of the production, the words of Valerie Ann Taylor, associated with the Center for Rehabilitation of the Paralyzed (CRP), seemed very relevant:

I want to say words fail me because I find it very difficult to sum up in words what a wonderful performance we've seen tonight. I feel particularly proud of three wheelchair users who've come from CRP. We are so grateful to be allowed to be part of this very unique and very special evening. ('Video')

Similarly, one of the male members of the audience reported that he actually shed a tear. Alison Blake, the British High Commissioner to Bangladesh, who was in the audience, summed up her experience in the following words:

I thought it was an amazing and inspirational performance to see the most extraordinary talented young actors bringing Shakespeare alive and also giving an amazing Bangladeshi flavor to it. I think it was one of the best performances I have seen in my life. It was moving and you could tell the audience were amazed. Something really historic. And I hope it will showcase Shakespeare, Britain and Bangladesh and just the sheer talent. ('Video')



However, the prime question that remained to be answered was how *exactly* this mechanics of exclusion was battled by these actors and how Sealey brought Shakespeare closer to the masses in Bangladesh—in other words, what were the literary and paralinguistic techniques that were followed to add a distinctive Bangladeshi flavor to this re-enactment of Shakespeare's play. One of the ways this rather difficult mission was achieved was through the use of familiar situations that common people could be more at home with and relate to their everyday life. The actors wore plain clothes; the marriage, for instance, was conducted in the Islamic manner, using the relevant familiar vocabulary; musicians (visually challenged themselves, except one) used traditional flutes and tambourines. Mamoon al Dhali, the set designer, who has worked for the *Shilpakala* academy, used a round stage to facilitate all-round vision for the audience. Jeni Draper helped Sealey with the rather difficult job of familiarizing the text using sign language for the actors who had hearing disability and Sealey also used signs during the rehearsals.

In an interview, when asked about her own experience with the staging of a play with an entire troupe of disabled actors, Sealey enthusiastically pointed out that she had never worked with a whole group of physically challenged actors before, and that she would not forget the enthusiasm they had shown on-stage. The mission of performing the play with an entire troupe of disabled actors was undertaken with the aim to fight the notion of marginalization that is faced by such actors and to change discriminatory attitudes. Though performing the play meant climbing a very 'high mountain', Sealey said that she employed two actors in place of a single one, one physically disabled and one deaf, on purpose, so that the entire text was also in sign language:

In my career as a director, I have never worked with an all non-disabled cast. Working with deaf and disabled people is what I do and what I know. It's a world I feel very at home in, as I am deaf. Our job is simply to put on the best play we can and to use what we have to inform the process. For example, one of the actors playing Tybalt has short, crossed legs, which he can wrap around the legs of a standing actor to completely floor them. Who needs daggers when you have such powerful legs? (Sealey)

The play received several critical comments. A critic, referring to Juliet's dying scene, humorously pointed out that she should have died faster, for the action to proceed further, while the lights needed to come back more promptly after this scene ('Video'). However, Sealey felt that the play would definitely be able to strike a chord in the hearts of the spectators, as love is a universal phenomenon, and connecting a Shakespearean play set in Verona with them should not be an issue. Bacchu Yosuf, who saw the final production of the play, was of the opinion that "they can do anything [...] translating

Shakespeare is a big challenge; it's all poetry" ('Video'). Yet, at the very end, the question remained whether these troupe members would ultimately come out of their obscure lives thanks to their involvement with the play and its adaptation, or whether they would be compelled to go back to their selfsame routine again.



The differently abled musicians of the play. Photograph by Tareque Mehdi.



Jenny Sealey leads the cast. Photograph by Tareque Mehdi.

The re-enactment of a ‘different’ *Romeo and Juliet* by the physically challenged actors of Bangladesh radically questions the issue of bodily disability as perceived in current Bangladeshi society and produces an alternative reactionary discourse within this canonical paradigm and its potential for re-telling. It questions and raises a voice against this oppressive politics enacted on this ‘Other’. The play has tried to bring into limelight the question of marginality vis-à-vis the politics and the relevant mechanics of exclusion connected with the dramatization of a canonical writer on stage and its subsequent reception by a group of physically challenged actors in a non-Anglophone setting.

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