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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

Derek Dunne: * *A Year of Shakespeare: Re-living the World Shakespeare Festival*, ed. Paul Edmondson, Paul Prescott and Erin Sullivan, 2013. Pp. 320; *Shakespeare Beyond English: A Global Experiment*, ed. Susan Bennett and Christie Carson, 2013. Pp. 341.

Considering the consistent depth of knowledge on display in both cases, it is hard not to seem reductive of what are careful distillations of complex theatrical events. Both books mark important contributions not just to non-Anglophone Shakespeare, but to the practice of reviewing in a twenty-first century global economy. *A Year of Shakespeare* covers every production that falls under the umbrella of the World Shakespeare Festival, totalling in excess of seventy essays. These include entries on BBC's *The Hollow Crown* series, 'Shakespeare: Staging the World' at the British Museum, and the opening ceremony of the Olympics. *Shakespeare Beyond English*, on the other hand, limits itself to the Globe to Globe Festival, meaning that its comparatively small number of essays (still over forty) have more room for expansion. While many of the reviewers appear in both volumes, only Stephen Purcell has the honour of reviewing the same production twice (Roy-e-Sabs' Afghan *Comedy of Errors*), thus doubling reviews as the play doubles Dromios. In what follows I look briefly at each collection in turn, before suggesting some common ground in terms of language barriers and their circumvention, 'strategic patriotism,' and the spectre of cultural imperialism.

If ever there was a case for not judging a book by its cover, *A Year of Shakespeare* is it: a leather suitcase sits on a cloud, plastered with reductive stickers (Romeo & Juliet=Rose; Hamlet=Skull).¹ The reviews contained within are far from reductive, displaying nuanced understanding of local contexts, political subtexts, and 'theatrical Esperanto' (116). Paul Prescott's essay on the future of reviewing is salutary, attending as it does to the need for multivocality in response to the multiculturalism on display during the World Shakespeare Festival: 'There should be as many ways of writing about Shakespearean performance as there are performances' (28).

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¹ Suitcases were popular props throughout the Festival.

These essays are at their strongest when reviewers have a firm grasp of a production's local contexts as well as its global import, and a special mention must go to Adele Lee, John Lavagnino and Penelope Woods in this respect. Sonia Massai's acute analysis of Dhaka Theatre Company's *The Tempest* reveals a play that staged 'traditional theatrical forms while subtly hinting at the very current challenges faced by Bangladesh' (197). In noting that the production was 'prepared with Bangladeshi audiences in mind' (197), Massai is one of several reviewers to raise the question of audience. Who are these productions being aimed at: native-speaking diaspora? ambassadors and officials? global media? The need to overcome language barriers through gesture, spectacle and non-verbal communication lead to ingenious solutions on the part of many companies, such as a circus-themed *Romeo and Juliet* from Grupo Galpão, with humour at times becoming as much of a *lingua franca* as Shakespeare.

On occasion, shows such as *Falstaff* at the Royal Opera House and the RSC's *Richard III* were reviewed without reference to the Festival to which they belonged, but this is in part attributable to the productions themselves. Indeed the RSC do not fare well overall, either ignoring the keywords 'World Shakespeare,' or coming dangerously close to replicating discourses of the Other in a *Julius Caesar* 'set in an unspecified, nameless African country' (93). Having said that, *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* strikes a note of resistance to 'the West's passive spectatorship of a story familiar to us from the nightly news' (184). There was little evidence of dissent across the Festival as a whole, with Shakespeare's cultural hegemony going largely unchallenged; an exception is Peter Kirwan's meticulous unpicking of the Janus-faced Russian production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream (As You Like It)*.

A Year of Shakespeare's biggest strength is also a weakness: the diversity of the contributors certainly shows the scope of what reviewing can be, and is becoming, but there is little cross-referencing between shows in order to draw out recurrent themes and motifs across the Festival. For example, time and again reviewers noted how a single English word or phrase in an otherwise non-Anglophone production elicited inordinate laughter – 'Not appropriate' (57); 'fish and chips' (139); 'Let's play' (161) – but how this related to the dynamics of a World Shakespeare Festival based mainly in Stratford-upon-Avon and London was not tackled. Nor does the book's 'Epilogue' attempt to sum up the richness of what has gone before. Having said that, the reviews never claim to have the last word on the matter, and the necessarily brief, thumbnail sketches they provide are a much-needed stimulus to further discussion.

By contrast, *Shakespeare Beyond English* presents readers with a more reflective look at the Globe to Globe Festival. Many but not all of the reviewers could speak the language of the production being reviewed, which makes a major difference in attending to subtle linguistic choices. Jeannie Farr and Benedict Schofield note the Bremer Shakespeare Company's 'games with

register, switching from everyday to coarse language, from the biblical to the militaristic' in *Timon aus Athen* (289). Elsewhere, in-depth knowledge of other countries' theatrical practice demonstrates that language is only one of multiple barriers to full engagement; thus Catherine Silverstone and Deanna Rankin brought their professional expertise to bear on the *te reo Māori Troilus and Cressida* and Japanese *Coriolanus* respectively.

The expanded word count allowed reviewers here to tease out the full implications of staging choices and political contexts. Particularly noteworthy in this respect are P. A. Skantze's incisive review of Q Brothers' *O-thell-o* as a product of late capitalist logic, and Keren Zaiontz's attention to re-appropriated nationalism and 'nomadic consciousness' in the Belarus Free Theatre *King Lear*. Robert Ormsby's makes an observation not attended to enough elsewhere, about a new 'global Shakespeare that marries the plays to cultural forms that do not necessarily belong to any one nation,' with the important addendum 'despite their mostly Hollywood origins' (152). Here is a global Shakespeare that cannot be reduced to local contexts and linguistic choices, but instead relies on a global grammar of which nationality is only one part.

On the whole, Bennett and Carson's book takes a more sceptical view of the cultural work being staged at and by the festival, raising 'important questions about possession and presence on Bankside' (248). Kim Solga investigates the neo-liberalism implicit in the media coverage of South Sudan's *Cymbeline*, pointing to the difference between publicity materials (in particular, 'feel good' trailers) and a production that spoke of disparity as well as diversity. Yet this was not simply a matter of 'foreign' Shakespeare, and Kate Rumbold's analysis of *Love's Labour's Lost* in British Sign Language showed how even in England, English could be a language of oppression (228). These accounts did not take away from the success of the Festival, but rather celebrated the ingenuity of companies in telling their story on their own terms (247).

Peter Kirwan was not alone in noting 'the many instances during the Festival during which the visiting companies were able to show the host nation how it can be done' (240). Similarly, David Ruiter observes that 'the global diversity of Shakespeare productions is truly the health and future of Shakespeare performance in the twenty-first century' (182), a point reiterated by Bridget Escolme when she notes 'the ways in which a Shakespeare beyond English might re-teach us Shakespeare' (311). Escolme's 'Decentring Shakespeare' does a fantastic job of pointing forward to the new horizons being created, and how the Globe to Globe Festival 'has provoked some questions its audiences might not otherwise have thought to ask' (310). Abigail Rokison's review of the Globe's English *Henry V* also falls into the 'Afterwords' section of the volume, but this remarkably tentative review does little to engage with the larger themes of the book's title.

It remains for me to touch on some features common to both books that speak to issues at the heart of this festival. Again and again, reviewers relate how they find themselves in a position of ignorance rather than knowledge when faced with a language (and culture) barrier. Peter Smith's observation in relation to the National Theatre of China's *Richard III* is typical: 'Though lost on this reviewer, [the assassinations] constantly aroused the laughter of the Mandarin speakers in the audience (one of whom told me at the interval that they were speaking an equivalent of London Cockney)' (*Year of Shakespeare*, 175). This reliance on local knowledge opened up new conversations within and about the theatre, giving non-Anglophone audiences a voice (albeit through English). As Elizabeth Schafer records, 'I asked the Urdu speakers sitting in front of me about the significance of the Basant kites, and they spoke enthusiastically about kite-flying in Pakistan and India' (*Shakespeare Beyond English*, 256).

Similarly the widespread use of online resources to supplement the reviewers' own knowledge is everywhere apparent, in lieu of what Michael Dobson calls, with characteristic candour, the 'simulated expertise offered by programme notes' (*Shakespeare Beyond English*, 192). Not only are other reviews consulted and referenced, but also interviews with directors, informal conversations with actors, and email correspondence with translators. This notable shift towards digital resources demonstrates what Eleanor Collins has called a new age of theatre reviewing in a post-consensus society.²

Both volumes attest to the fact that non-verbal comedy travels more easily than its tragic counterpart, as 'larger-than-life gestures seemed to engage the widest audience' (*Shakespeare Beyond English*, 231). Sonia Massai puts it best when she says 'language is no longer the dominant element of the *mise-en-scène*' (*Shakespeare Beyond English*, 97). There can even be detected moments of frustration on the part of reviewers when a company has translated Shakespeare's language into their own, without recalibrating their performance to include those who do not speak that language (*Year of Shakespeare*, 207; *Shakespeare Beyond English*, 173). This returns us to the question of who, precisely, are these *performances* for, perhaps necessitating a distinction between non-Anglophone Shakespeare and non-Anglophone Shakespeare for English speakers.

Contributors were constantly aware of the cultural work being staged for audiences, whether in the form of the 'strategic patriotism' apparent in a Spanish *Henry VIII* (*Shakespeare Beyond English*, 274), the mixed messages of transatlantic *Troilus and Cressida* (*Year of Shakespeare*, 216), or the marketing of a 'Rainbow Nation' via a South African *Venus and Adonis* (*Shakespeare Beyond English*, 34). Nomenclature is always going to create a problem to some

² 'Theatre reviewing in post-consensus society: Performance, Print and the Blogosphere,' *Shakespeare*, 6.3 (2010), 330-336.

extent, and at times a lack of specificity drove home the need for more work on how to discuss non-Anglophone Shakespeare. What precisely is the difference between ‘multicultural’ (*Year of Shakespeare*, 229) and ‘interculturality’ (*Shakespeare Beyond English*, 119), ‘transnational’ (*Shakespeare Beyond English*, 130) and ‘hyper-global’ (*Year of Shakespeare*, 152)?

Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has a talk entitled ‘The danger of a single story,’ where she describes how reductive it can be to know only one detail about a person, place, or continent.³ One of the most important contributions of these two books is their binocularly: in making available at least two reviews of each Globe to Globe production – sometimes complementary, sometimes contrasting – it ensures that this component of the Festival is never reduced to a single voice. What Ann Thompson sees as a *Hamlet* ‘systematically drained ... of emotion’ (*Shakespeare Beyond English*, 300), can be compared with Stephen Purcell’s more favourable take on a play of bold and striking visual images, that is nevertheless an ill fit for the Globe stage.

The thought and skill manifested first by the performers and then by the reviewers in connection with the World Shakespeare Festival bears out Mark Thornton Burnett’s observation that ‘local concerns are always accommodated by, and in conversation with, global imperatives.’⁴ Shakespeare emerges as an eminently global and distinctly local phenomenon, and both of these books begin to resolve such a productive cultural paradox.

³ http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.

⁴ Mark Thornton Burnett, *Filming Shakespeare in the Global Marketplace* (Palgrave, 2007), p. 64.