

Theatre Reviews

Thea Buckley:* *The Taming of the Shrew, Globe to Globe. Dir. Haissam Hussain, 26-27 May 2012.*

An Equal Partnership: Pakistan's Shakespeare, or Transforming the *Shrew*

A discussion of the reception of a Pakistani Shakespeare production in England becomes immediately complicated by the rarity of this occurrence. Any such production by its nature functions as a Polaroid photograph fixing in time several slippery variables, in an instantly emblematic snapshot that may later serve as a defining history. It would be similarly simplistic to let the 2012 Urdu-language London-based production of *The Taming of the Shrew* (or *Ilaaj-E-Zid Dastayaab Hai*) serve as shorthand for the complicated and colourful topic of Pakistan's Shakespeare and its reception, Anglophone or otherwise.

The topic is perhaps as complicated and colourful as the critical discussion surrounding Shakespeare's problematic rom-com and its controversially misogynistic story. *Shrew* is now widely performed in a more egalitarian, global, politically correct twenty-first century society, one that is largely alienated from the play's skewed gendering and its ambiguous resolution. The Urdu *Shrew*, directed by Haissam Hussain for the Theatre Wallay-Kashf, confronted these temporal, textual, societal, cultural and relational complexities head-on. Future audiences will determine whether the result can be called definitive or pioneering of its genre; for now it is enough to examine the production as a useful sample whereby to gauge its reception by audiences in England. This essay first traces the Urdu adaptation's genesis and performance, and then contextualizes these in a discussion of the issues surrounding its reception.

Bringing the Urdu *Shrew* to the Globe

The Pakistani *Shrew* played at Oxford and London, before touring to Rotherham and Bradford, centres with Urdu-speaking communities. The production detailed here is the first of two performed in London from 25-26 May 2012 at

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Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, a location with historical and cultural associations that might suggest an Anglophone audience. Even if this *Shrew* was performed during the World Shakespeare Festival as well as "Globe to Globe 2012," it was commissioned to highlight the United Kingdom's 2012 Olympics and the accompanying Cultural Olympiad. The UK likewise formed the physical and cultural locus of the world map on the online project A Year of Shakespeare, which documented the WSF productions and situated their host countries. The website was criticized by Alex Huang for its Anglocentric perspective. He complained that the festival was "in large part the London Globe's global Shakespeare" and that the "uses of world maps in this case – informed by a metropolitan bias – reify a sense of British ownership of Shakespeare – both global and English." Despite its indisputably Anglocentric geography, the Globe Theatre has come to represent a physical location for the global celebration of Shakespeare.

At the first Pakistan International Conference on Shakespeare, in 1997, Stanley Wells used the Globe Theatre as a metaphor for global Shakespeare:

This is a symbolically appropriate time for the holding of a conference dedicated to the theme of Shakespeare around the globe. Had I not been speaking here, I should have been taking part in the festivities celebrating the first full season of plays in performance at the newly reconstructed Globe Theatre. (1)

In this way he placed the two occasions and locations on a par. While the Globe had previously hosted visiting foreign productions, 2012 was the first year in which it celebrated these in a Globe to Globe Festival. For *Shrew*'s Pakistani company, including Theatre Wallay head Navid Shahzad, the Globe stage was a global proscenium, as she expressed to Ser Khan:

Pakistan will be participating on a platform which can help promote a liberal view of the country through theatre. ("Localising *Taming of the Shrew*")

Their performance thus represented a chance to showcase Pakistan's cultural prowess before a global audience.

The intent behind the Urdu adaptation was arguably also rooted in its female producers' desire to give the play's women characters an equal, independent portrayal. Shahzad spoke to Sheema Khan of Shakespeare's continuing relevance "in a patriarchal society like ours, where daughters are pushed into relationships" ("When arts and literature mix with one's blood"). Shahzad's collaborator, American academic Susannah Harris-Wilson, explained to Aneeta Madhavan that she selected the play because the Pakistani women she had grown to know well while teaching in Lahore seemed to fit her interpretation of the Elizabethan woman in *Shrew*, who is

able to be on an equal plane with the men who are educated, and finds that she is outstripping a number of men, and thinking for herself, and so no longer the feudal arranged marriage system applies to her. (“*Taming of the Shrew* in Urdu”)

This nuanced portrayal of female independence in Pakistan would be especially useful for an Anglocentric audience whose knowledge of the subject is arguably modelled on only a handful of strong and educated women highlighted by the international media, such as the late politician Benazir Bhutto, or the soft-spoken teenage activist Malala, both of whom were attacked in an attempt to silence them.

Pakistan has for the last few years been consistently listed in the bottom three most dangerous countries worldwide for women on The World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Report, which shows that Pakistan has “both large education gender gaps as well as economic ones” (32). The country, writes Meghan Casserly, is where

cultural, tribal and religious practices harmful to women are frequent. These include acid attacks, forced or underage marriages and punishment by stoning or other physical abuse. (“The Five Most Dangerous Countries to Be a Woman”)

The WEF report data arguably show a correlation between the decline in gender equality and the Taliban’s rise. Gender equality is an issue of especial importance to Pakistan, making the Urdu *Shrew* timely.

An Equal Partnership: Pakistan’s *Shrew* in Performance

Would feminism or patriarchy triumph in this Pakistani interpretation? A discussion of Shakespeare’s *Shrew* inevitably centres on its controversially misogynistic conclusion, wherein Katherine (the “Shrew”) publicly declares her unconditional obedience to her spouse, Petruchio (the “Tamer”). But what happens to the story if the protagonists’ names are instead Kiran and Rustum, and the speech is made in the Urdu language?¹ Would theirs be a “modern” love match of mutual choice, or a “traditional” parental arrangement? Theatre Wallay’s vibrant production soon answered these questions, weaving intercultural threads into a magic carpet, reflecting, challenging, and ultimately soaring above such polarized stereotypes.

¹ Where names can be transliterated or spelt differently, the Globe programme version is preferred here.

First time Shakespeare director Haissam Hussain's version followed *Shrew's* plot closely. The primary deviation was to reset the play in springtime Pakistan, a setting evoked through costume, music, dance, and Laila Rehman's simple, portable set. Before an expectant Globe audience basking in appropriately warm May temperatures, Anila Rahim's vivid painted canvas of a Lahore street scene formed the stage backdrop. Draped from balcony to floor, this depicted a Basant festival scene with stalls of coloured powders and a rainbow of kites in a cloudless sky. A small star-and-crescent symbol among these elements overtly indicated the production's national origins. Excitement at this sub-continental Shakespeare was palpable in the audience, and one member proudly told me it was a rare production from her homeland.

The pride among those Urdu speakers present was evident when a cheer went up at the word "Urdu," spoken by Salman Shahid. This popular Pakistani veteran TV, film and theatre comic (later an uproariously funny Baptista Minola/MianBasheer) welcomed us in English. He took centre stage in a simple, long-sleeved, cream-and-grey kurta outfit, and introduced the orchestra of six, members of the Sufi rock band Mekaal Hasan directed by Valerie Kaul.² Mixing the modern guitar with the native flute, sitar, dholak (drum) and rubab (lute), they opened with Pakistan's National Anthem, before one band member started the action by crowing comically like a rooster.

The subsequent stumbling entry of Sly/Ravi (Maria Khan) through the delighted crowd signalled a vital plot alteration – instead of a drunken male bumpkin, we would be led through the play by an omniscient shape-shifting Scheherazade (the female storyteller of the *Arabian Nights*, who "tames" her misogynist husband and becomes his queen). Harris-Wilson intended Sly to be "a tier up of loose threads, and a chorus, that makes this partnership between the audience [and performers]" ("*Taming of the Shrew* in Urdu"). Resplendent in a glittering, gold-coin headdress and a mirrored, multicoloured garment, Ravi took on multiple roles as she wove the thread of the story through the play's framework. She danced through and involved the crowd, and appeared to double *Shrew's* cast of fourteen, becoming alternately beggar/ courtesan/ clotheshorse/ vendor/ clown/ conspirator. Finally, with the help of jacket, beard, and boots, she transformed into Vincentio/ Tajir. This plot device of a shape-shifting narrator neatly reflected the wider transformation in the cast of characters' identities and personalities. In connecting and transforming the onstage and offstage, foreign and familiar, Ravi functioned as a Scheherazade, introducing multiple characters. In evoking Scheherazade, she further fulfilled Sly's framing function, providing a meta-narrative or outer framework for the play's own "spouse-taming" narrative.

² The band's arrangement for Pakistan's National Anthem can be heard here <<http://soundcloud.com/mekaal-hasan-band>>.

This production choice of a female storyteller to drive the narrative action arguably also echoed the producers' emphasis on gender equality: Harris-Wilson stated that Sly was originally supposed to be represented by a *sunderbund* (thread weaver) called Abu Hassan after a male narrator from the *Arabian Nights* ("*Taming of the Shrew* in Urdu"). The same promotion of female independence could be said to be behind the choice of entrusting *Shrew's* rendering into Urdu to an all-female team of translators: Maryam Pasha, Zaibun Pasha and Aamna Kaul. The translation was praised by those in the know for being "imbued with ironic undertones and good old Pakistani humour" (British Council) while "retaining the essence of original Shakespearian language with imagery, rhythms and meter of the play" (Sahar Iqbal 42). For its non-Urdu, Anglophone audience at an inherent loss to understand and appreciate the language or culture, the production strove to bridge this gap by also relying heavily on physical humour, musical narrative, and visual metaphor to tell Kiran's and Rostum's story.

This theme of transformative female independence was nowhere more overt than in Kiran's evolution, with Rostum's abettance, from bird in a gilded cage to free-flying "falcon" (*Shrew* 4.1.126). This was echoed through the visual metaphor of flight, a theme, visible in the kite backdrop and clearly alluded to in the onstage décor of two ornate birdcages, one with a free bird atop it. For Elizabeth Schafer, these kites worked on multiple levels, evoking the "taming" methods used on both Kate and kites in falconry (259). Kiran's taming, here a transformation, was also reflected in her increasingly free movement to music. She entered sullen, silent and earthbound, casually popping peanuts in the doorway while rolling her eyes at her sister's suitors – side-splittingly portrayed by Ahmed Ali (Tranio/Mir), Osman Khalid Butt (Hortensio/Hasnat), Umer Naru (Lucentio/Qazim) and Mukkarum Kaleem (Gremio/Ghazi). *Shrew's* heroine later lamented over a kite torn by her spoilt sister Bina (a spitefully simpering Karen David), before becoming the dancing, kite-flying Kiran that Rostum fell in love with at first sight, and then the twirling, newlywed woman of the house. Hoisted onto Rostum's lap during their courtship, his shoulders after the wedding, and a pedestal during her final speech, Kiran's vertical journey on the stage space symbolically mirrored her inner growth. It simultaneously represented her gradual rise in her own estimation as well as that of her society, and this was accompanied, phoenix-like, by flame-gradient-coloured changes of costume between each landmark scene.

Lead actress Nadia Jamil explained her own feelings after the show, when I asked her what first attracted her to the role of Kiran. She animatedly retorted, "Nothing – nothing! I just wanted to kill her at first!" Then her face softened, and she laughed. "But then, she fell in love – when people fall in love, you know, they do crazy, amazing things" (personal communication 27 May 2012). Rostum Khan, this *Shrew's* hero (a macho, sensitive portrayal by Omair Rana) was clearly also in love. He threatened, but did not follow through, on cuffing Kiran back; a wink and

a sigh accompanied and softened his temporary mirroring of her mistreatment of others. In the Globe's recorded interview, Omair Rana later joked, "I think Rustum's character was more of a shrew, and eventually got tamed by her!" He added, "We presented that point of view, that it's not necessarily a man who is dominating in his misogynistic sense the woman, but becoming equals" ("Interview: International Insights"). Kiran's transformation was visibly abetted by her husband's love, and she evolved from a woman who had once terrified men into one who made her father shed tears of joy.

Rana also highlighted a metaphor of sexual equality that was subtly reflected in the play through the costumes and the weaving motif:

The *Koran* says, 'Your wife is your garment, and you are a garment for them.' And we use the Urdu word for garment, garment is *libaas*... we use that repeatedly, to reflect that. ("Interview: International Insights")

This *Shrew*'s costume changes were metamorphic, running the Lahore gamut from gorgeous to grotesque: curled slippers to plastic sandals, floral shirts to silken shawls. Rana connected this emphasis on garb with what he saw as *Shrew*'s metaphor of inner worth and loving acceptance, reflected in Rustum's mock-déshabillé at the wedding, or as he explained "It doesn't matter what garment you're wearing, it's what you are inside that matters" ("Interview: International Insights"). One Anglophone audience member, Sandra Lawson, picked up on this theme of reciprocity and clothing via the actors' non-verbal communication, observing,

When Petruchio offers Kate his shawl because she is cold, this shared piece of clothing brings them together. It is apparent that this is the moment when she falls in love with her husband, a man who is not of her own choosing. ("*The Taming of the Shrew*")

Sexual equality and loving unity was also the focus of the denouement. Kiran's speech in the final scene reflected partnership and was an unforgettably tender team act with Rustum. Linking hands, and taking equal turns atop a low table-pedestal, the couple mimed both the marital quarrels to be avoided and the tenderness to be encouraged. Reviewer Peter Kirwan observed, "This *Shrew* discovered the unity in the speech which perhaps native-language performances have ignored or been unable to find" ("*The Taming of the Shrew* (Theatre Wallay) @ Shakespeare's Globe"). In accurately understanding the intentions behind the production's conclusion, Kirwan was vindicated in feeling that "for much of the play a non-Urdu speaker could follow the familiar play line-for-line" ("*The Taming of the Shrew* (Theatre Wallay) @ Shakespeare's Globe"). His and Lawson's observations as Anglophone audience members indicate that the Urdu *Shrew* ultimately succeeded in transcending linguistic and cultural differences.

The play concluded with Salman Shahid quoting an Urdu verse by Bulleh Shah. This Sufi philosopher-poet, Rana explained to interviewer Suman Bhuchar, is “the equivalent of Shakespeare that Pakistan had” (“*The Taming of the Shrew* in Urdu at the Globe”). Behind the verse’s selection was lead actress Jamil, who had first recalled the verse in a dream about rehearsing the play, then convinced the rest of the cast that it should be incorporated at the play’s end. Jamil told Bhuchar that this quote represented the essence of the play’s metaphor about selfless love:

Because to me, that is what this play is about [... the producer] wanted it to be about educated women [...] But the fact is, that you search for [self] knowledge. [...] Bulleh Shah is spot on when he says it’s just about dropping your ego, and learning how to love. (“*The Taming of the Shrew* in Urdu at the Globe”)

Rana expanded on this: “It’s the power of unconditional giving. And that is truly empowering for the self” (“*The Taming of the Shrew* in Urdu at the Globe”). In honouring Jamil’s suggestion, allowing the perspective and work of women from Pakistan and other cultures to be as equally valued as that of the men, the production arguably also fulfilled the vision of Asia-centric critics of intercultural theatre, such as Rustom Bharucha. Bharucha stresses the importance of having “a respect for individual histories;” he advocates using a “method of work that reflects larger principles of exchange”, including the active involvement of the actresses, to avoid the power imbalance inherent in retelling a feminist story if women are directed by men (viii, 6). The production not only achieved this by including the summative Sufi quote, but also further demonstrated that women were very equal partners in the Urdu *Shrew*.

In its peaceful coexistence and joint triumph of the sexes, producer Harris-Wilson’s intention was thus arguably successfully realized in performance, with partnerships acting as catalysts for societal transformation or, as she paraphrases Shakespeare (*Shrew* 5.1.124), “What miracles love hath wrought.” As the cast reunited onstage in a closing dance, the intercultural Globe audience clapped along united in appreciation.

Receiving Pakistan’s *Shrew*: After the Show

If the intentions behind the presentation of the Pakistani *Shrew* were largely successfully realized in performance, the question still remains of the outcome. What was their significance – what was the overall reception? “Reception” is a term presupposing an audience. Yet, the rarity of “Pakistani Shakespeare” makes it, as said earlier, difficult to typify an audience at all for the phenomenon. This situation is further complicated by the historical and situational relationship

of this South Asian production to its British host locations; like the touring production, its audience could be called culturally liminal.

The audience for the 25 May play was visibly evenly divided between those who understood Urdu and who laughed in all the appropriate places, and those who did neither. This was one challenge for a play that was partly meant to bridge a presupposed gap between Pakistani and other cultures. The production was originally sponsored by the British Council, its website states, as part of its “global commitment to arts and intercultural relations.” According to the website, while the adaptation “addressed contemporary issues, particularly that of the role of educated and strong women in a patriarchal society,” it also functioned as a forum for intercultural dialogue.

To some extent, this dialogue between audience members was visible; afterwards, as the site mentions, “British Pakistanis were seen going up to the performers appreciating their brilliant role as cultural ambassadors.” The issue of culture here however becomes murky when trying to determine the precise shades of interculturalism and the ratio of one culture to another. Besides the presence of a diasporic audience of South Asian origin, as equally native to London as the non-Urdu speaking Londoners, there was an added guest audience in the form of an unusually high number of tourists with the Olympic visitors from all over the globe.

In a pre-Olympics Intercultural Symposium hosted at Shakespeare’s Globe, on 19 May 2012, Globe to Globe Festival Director Tom Bird had stated that this diasporic audience was at the forefront of the intentions behind the Festival, which were to “engage the different linguistic and cultural communities of London.” The Pakistani *Shrew*’s target audience was no exception. The Globe website page for the production highlighted the fact that Urdu speakers number *one million* UK speakers. Urdu, Pakistan’s national language is mutually intelligible with Hindi, giving *Shrew* an even wider audience. In 2012 the UK’s foreign-born population numbered 7.7 million, with 2.8 million in London alone; Pakistan and India, both Urdu-speaking countries, were in the top three countries of birth for the migrant population (Rienzo, Vargas-Silva). Much of this *Shrew*’s audience, as reflected in first-person reviews or quotes, was undoubtedly diasporic.

The Urdu Shakespeare production’s rarity heightens its importance in functioning as a forum for intercultural dialogue, for not only its Anglophone and Pakistani-origin Urdu-speaking audiences, still linked by vestiges of post-colonialism, but also among its diasporic South Asian audience. Pakistan originated as a nation after unprecedented human migration and catastrophic violence born of its partition from India to become a separate Islamic Republic. Their relationship has yet to recover from the violence of their being split along artificial boundary lines drawn by the then British government. The Pakistani diaspora remains especially close to its first motherland; Kalra, Kaur and Hutnykstate that while “many diasporic groups can be called ‘deterritorialised’

because their collective claims to an identity do not depend upon residence on a particular plot of land,” yet “the Pakistani diaspora has a much closer and intimate economic and political connection with Pakistan” (32,19). This post-colonial relationship also impacts the emerging identity of Pakistani Shakespeare; the entry for “Pakistan” in the *Oxford Companion to Shakespeare* tellingly still contains a single reference: “see India” (336). While Pakistan has its own Shakespeare Association, founded at the University of Karachi in 1997 by Professor Rafat Karim, the scholar’s obituary in Pakistan’s *Dawn* newspaper cited his reputation as “the only person from Pakistan to regularly attend international Shakespeare conferences and seminars around the world” (“Prof Rafat Karim Passes Away”). The Urdu *Shrew* production was therefore especially important in helping to define Pakistan on the international and intercultural Shakespeare map.

The production’s importance as representative of Pakistani culture to its audience thus cannot be overemphasized. Veteran actor Salman Shahid had made light of the Pakistani National Anthem being played at the production’s start, joking, “now these musicians will play [the] national anthem of Pakistan, of course, but don’t worry, it is just the national anthem not a takeover!” (Azlan). The joke not only broke the ice but also functioned to excuse the fact that the playing of national anthems was technically outside the official Festival guidelines for visiting companies. Bird told us on 19 May that he had already noted that a sense of nationalism was ever-present in the Festival, despite the organizers actively working against it, including making an official request to dispense with overt representations such as flags, anthems or passports. “Hearing Urdu on an English stage is a thrill in itself,” diasporic audience member Nosheen Iqbal wrote of her experience at the Bradford production (“*The Taming of the Shrew* – review”). For Pakistan, such a representation was clearly too important to omit.

When the anthem began, as is often done before a Pakistani theatre performance, the audience stood up en masse. Backstage, the cast attended as well: “For all of us, it’s a very emotional moment backstage,” Nadia Jamil proudly told Bhuchar (“*The Taming of the Shrew* in Urdu at the Globe”). Kirwan, in the audience for the 26 May performance, was impressed by this cultural ambassadorship. He wrote that the overt nationalism lent the production poignancy and agency:

For the first time that I’ve seen in a Globe to Globe production, a member of the company came onto the stage to introduce the play and the company’s honour at being here, before asking the musicians to play the Pakistani national anthem [...] The joy and pride apparently felt by the company in being at the Globe translated into a confident, hysterical and moving performance, offering one of the finest *Shrew* [productions] I’ve yet seen. (“*The Taming of the Shrew* (Theatre Wallay) @ Shakespeare’s Globe”)

The Urdu-speaking audience likewise received the production with open arms. Shakespeare thus became a vehicle for the transmission of Pakistani cultural pride.

Lead actors Rana and Jamil spoke passionately behind the scenes about the importance of the Globe performance as a platform to promote a more accurate global representation of Pakistani culture. With the Urdu *Shrew*, “We could show that there was also a *human* face to Pakistan,” Rana told Bhuchar, “We’re a passionate people, we’re loud, and we love food in Lahore ... so we use those elements” (“*The Taming of the Shrew* in Urdu at the Globe”). He stressed the importance of countering the negative stereotypes of Pakistan as often portrayed in the international media, and through this, of “empowering people who are associated with the Urdu language and Pakistan, hopefully, to raise their chins high and be proud” (“*The Taming of the Shrew* in Urdu at the Globe”). In the UK, this issue is especially relevant; immigration is such a sensitive political and social topic that the term “Paki,” once merely slang for “Pakistani,” has become an insulting reference to any immigrant of South Asian racial origin. Jamil also criticized the first world media’s narrow stereotyping of a bearded Pakistani man as the face of radical Islam: “Why can’t you show an intelligent beard?” she asked wryly. “My dad has a beard, and he has a brain as well!” Rana added drolly, “Well, I’m donning a beard, and I’m on stage at the Globe!” (“*The Taming of the Shrew* in Urdu at the Globe”). The joke made the more serious point that he was publicly protesting and dispelling a cultural stereotype via Shakespearean theatre and its most famous public platform.

In addition to dispelling negative stereotypes, and fostering Pakistani audience pride, the production’s cast further aspired to use Shakespeare as a catalyst for Pakistani self-affirmation at home. Jamil declared to Bhuchar, “Pakistanis—all over the world and in Pakistan also—need more things to identify with which they can hold their heads up and say yes, that is us!” (“*The Taming of the Shrew* in Urdu at the Globe”). This positive representation of Pakistani culture was well received in Bradford, where British Pakistani reviewer Nosheen Iqbal described her pride at the unique production,

I can’t remember the last time I saw a portrayal of Pakistanis that didn’t involve bomb making and obsessive praying. Nor have I ever heard the Pakistani National Anthem performed in Britain. (“*The Taming of the Shrew* – review”)

According to her Pakistan-born mother, even more than representing Shakespeare, the play represented a precious bit of Pakistan in England, “It was like a scented breeze from my motherland” (“*The Taming of the Shrew* – review”).

For other audience members, the Urdu language adaptation meant that much was missed. The Anglophone audience was aided by a working knowledge of the story and the Globe’s rudimentary summative surtitles that scrolled across

digital screens on either side of the stage. However, these held confusingly different variants of the lead characters' names – “Kiran” alternated with Katherine's transliterated Pakistani appellation “Qurat-Ul-Aine” (“power of the eyes”). It was not only difficult to catch the subtleties of the language, it was also difficult to interpret cultural nuances. Pakistan's *Dawn* newspaper reported that the adaptation “represented characters from Pakistan's four provinces and good naturedly poked fun at ethnic archetypes” (“Theatre Review: Shakespeare at the Globe – In Urdu”). Rana later identified these four to Bhachar as “the Pashtun, the Sindhi, the Punjabi, the Urdu.” At the time, however, the fact that Rustum and Kiran came from different areas in Pakistan, heightening their differences, was lost on an audience unfamiliar with the cultural subtext. Much of the humour interlaced with these regional stereotypes went over our head, and any accompanying connotations were lost on those ignorant of these Pakistani subcultures.

Despite our ignorance of such subtleties, the approach taken by the actors – using exaggerated gestures and facial expressions – was very successful in communicating the rich world of Pakistani humour, with its comic timing and physical comedy. It became quickly apparent that standard theatre slapstick such as a trip roll or a fart joke translates instantly into universal audience appreciation across all cultural barriers. Rana described the attention and affection he felt from the crowd,

It was literally coming home. They were so receptive, and forgiving, and loving, and the *details* that they caught onto, it's something that we in theatre are not used to. (“Interview: International Insights”)

The audience members also interacted with each other, with the Urdu-speaking audience enjoying sharing their understanding with their guests, effectively on inverted home territory. Reviewer Matt Wolf wrote that Bulleh Shah and his concluding quote were explained to him by “the very kind Pakistani medic who was seated next to me with her family, all of whom loved every minute of the show” (“Shakespeare's study in domestic discord played brightly and for laughs”). Lawson also noted the bonhomie and the easy accessibility of this humorous approach to *Shrew*:

This production is played heavily for laughs and even though I was in the minority, and surrounded by Pakistani audience members, many of the jokes were easy to understand. (“*The Taming of the Shrew*”)

An often overlooked reason some of these jokes were so easy to understand, is that the production also occasionally bridged the “cultural divide” through using a shared vocabulary. In doing so, it subverted another of the Globe to Globe's

golden rules, as Bird had stated to us: “No English.” The visiting companies had been urged to perform not adaptations, but purely translations into their own language. Rather than artificially purging English loan words from their translation, *Shrew*’s translators created Urdu dialogues with a realistic everyday sprinkling of English vocabulary. These bits were especially effective in scenes that mocked the present-day immigration issue with its coveted green card lottery. For example, in vying for Bianca/ Bina’s hand by proclaiming their ever-greater eligibility, one suitor impressively declared that he had a “five year entry visa,” whereupon he was promptly outdone by his rival, who brought the house down by flourishing the ultimate trump card, “British passport!” The joke clearly struck a chord with the entire audience, on multiple levels of humour.

Comic Pakistani Shakespeare has a precedent. In 1997, Pakistan hosted a visiting Royal Shakespeare Company production, Tim Supple’s *Comedy of Errors*, co-sponsored by the British Council. Reviewer Michael Church wrote that Supple had voiced his concern that the play’s gender politics might have “an incendiary effect” on Pakistani audiences, in particular the debate between Adriana and Luciana, with “one asking why her husband should enjoy rights which were denied her, the other replying that that was simply the way of the world” (“All around the world in stages”). Church feared this concern was particularly applicable to the venue where he caught up with the touring show, Lahore, “a city made famous this year through the case of Saima Waheed, whose father had imprisoned her for daring to marry the man she loved, rather than the man he had chosen for her” (“All around the world in stages”). However, Church soon found that these assumptions of a Pakistani theatre audience were unfounded: “The theatre did not break up in disorder: the evening was of a very different stamp” (“All around the world in stages”). The Lahore audience, he found, not only

missed surprisingly little in the [English] text but was relaxed enough over the gender tensions to enjoy the comic moments, especially the physical slapstick. (“All around the world in stages”)

Schafer similarly felt that humour was the overall central thread of the 2012 Urdu *Shrew*. She posited that the opening Pakistani takeover joke set the tone for the entire production:

big issues were in circulation in terms of gender and international stereotyping, but the production consistently asked the audience to choose laughter. (256)

Amidst the humour, the serious moments were not lost on the attentive intercultural audience. Underlying the passport joke was arguably producer Harris-Wilson’s belief that an equal marriage is still difficult for Pakistani women:

educated Pakistani women are finding it more difficult to find appropriate partners in their home country. Many of them leave for the UK and the USA to find men who will appreciate and encourage their intelligence and modernity as equal partners. (“*Taming of the Shrew* in Urdu”)

Jamil echoed this perception, telling Bhuchar that Kiran’s father as a “broad-minded” man who has “educated his daughters [yet is typically only] obsessed with [their] marriage” (“*The Taming of the Shrew* in Urdu at the Globe”). Rana added that he felt that the play reflected Pakistani patriarchy with “the dowry culture” and “the father wanting to wed off the elder [daughter] before the younger” (“*The Taming of the Shrew* in Urdu at the Globe”). While *Shrew*’s audience was overwhelmingly positive in its reception of Kiran’s concluding speech on marriage, Lawson expressed her disappointment. She posited that, in trying to stay true to its culture, the production actually restricted its options and thus suffered. She claimed:

Although this is an enjoyable and entertaining version of Shakespeare’s play, it wants to conform to the restrictions of Pakistani society. In this production it is not necessary to tame Kate into submission because society would dictate that she must obey her father and not stray very far from his command. (“*The Taming of the Shrew*”)

Lawson thus pinpointed the fact that the love story of Kiran and Rustam, while portraying gender equality in theory, was still unequally representative of practice in the context of its cultural reality.

Pakistanis’ continuing struggles for social and sexual equality both in the UK and overseas are widely highlighted in the international media. Schafer mentioned one case in her review:

One of the main news stories in the British press at the time was feeding the worst British stereotypes about Pakistani culture: the trial of the parents of Shafiea Ahmed (1986-2003), accused of murdering their daughter because she refused an arranged marriage, can read as a brutal taming narrative. (258)

Stereotypes aside, Pakistani women have been consistently disempowered, in a society which is still firmly patriarchal. This gender gap is illustrated by Kamila Shamsie in a fictional story, where she compares stereotypical Pakistani versus typical Anglophone receptions of Shakespeare, in order to highlight issues such as the vastly differing cultural perception of women’s rights. In the story, Shamsie has just come back to Pakistan from studying in England, and she recounts *Measure for Measure* to her household staff. In doing so, she finds that she has to gradually alter the Shakespearean narrative to fit her audience’s differing cultural perceptions on what constitutes topics such as political

corruption, religious piety and gender equality. One of the more telling moments in Shamsie's short story occurs when Ama, the ayah, imagines the orphaned Isabella as entirely helpless without a man,

Without any male relatives, how will she survive? Who will find a husband for her? Who will protect her honour? What will her life then be worth? However base a man Claudio might be, he is still her brother, and his very presence in her world will give her some degree of security. (138)

Such security is especially vital to the women of Pakistan.

The sober issues highlighted by the Urdu *Shrew* included not only the importance of gender equality but also that of preserving and sustaining Pakistan's cultural heritage amidst the pressures of globalization. Jamil stressed the key role of the show's music,

there was also a very strong element of classical music, which I wish more Pakistanis would also tune into, because it is our heritage, it is our culture, and we are letting it die out. ("*The Taming of the Shrew* in Urdu at the Globe")

Another vital cultural element that was depicted onstage was Pakistan's Basant festival. Elements of this famous national festival of springtime kite-flying were pervasive throughout the adaptation, reflected in the painted set backdrop, echoed in the coloured costumes, and reproduced in the onstage action. The Basant festival functioned as a framework for the metaphors of flight, freedom, and regeneration. Yet the festival itself was ironically perpetuated in vibrant life only in an overseas stage representation of its cultural centre of Lahore, a year or so after its real-life ban at home by government order. When it abandoned the festival framework, the Urdu *Shrew* production suffered, remarked the *Dawn* reviewer, and hinted at the real-life implications this brought,

The one incongruous moment in the play was when the director chose to indicate the dawning of a new day with the off-stage recitation of the Fajr prayer. [...] The audience's mood became somber as the scene did not ring with the colour, humour and joy of the rest of the play. In an otherwise thoroughly enjoyable evening, this scene was the one painful reminder of the vibrant cultural heritage that Pakistanis are fast suppressing in favour of an overbearing religious identity. ("Theatre Review: Shakespeare at the Globe – In Urdu")

Basant has been officially banned in Pakistan for the last few years on grounds of health and safety, due to reported past incidents of injured celebrants whose kites had come into contact with live electric wires. The timeline of the Pakistan government ban, however, also coincides with the increasing socio-political pressure from changing religious norms.

The festival is a secular, seasonal one that marks the Punjabi New Year and the advent of spring. “Basant was celebrated by all communities including Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims in the pre-partition India,” writes Sehyr Mirza, adding, “However, the orthodox elements in Pakistan have always labelled it as un-Islamic” (“Is Basant a thing of the past?”). Arshad Alam reports that “In Pakistan, fanatic Muslim groups had publicly threatened people against celebrating Basant.” He maintains that

Reclaiming Basant as a space for cultural hybridity was a political act which challenged the insular understanding of dominant Islam which was increasingly getting de-culturalized. (“Basant in Pakistan: Another Politics is Possible”)

In light of the importance of Basant as an outlet for celebrating communal harmony and cultural hybridity, this Globe performance was arguably intended further as a public platform for creative subversion, one where Pakistanis could freely revive and celebrate their cultural heritage and invite the rest of the globe to join in the revelry.

In Conclusion: Celebrating Love and Partnership

The Urdu *Shrew*, celebrating both Basant and Shakespeare during the Cultural Olympiad, was an intercultural success on multiple levels. Audience member Wolf happily concluded that

One not only sees Shakespeare refracted through the broadest cultural prism imaginable, but it’s more than possible to leave the auditorium having made new friends. (“Shakespeare’s study in domestic discord played brightly and for laughs”)

The Globe to Globe performances were further made available to the world outside the auditorium, being posted for several months as full length recordings, via the UK Arts Council sponsored online archive *The Space*. One suspects that the next *Oxford Companion* will include an independent entry for Pakistan, perhaps complete with a colour photo of the production’s Globe to Globe Festival Basant backdrop. Meanwhile, the vibrant performance of the Urdu *Shrew* could be said to have reached a truly global audience, starting at home, a home defined not merely by the occupants’ passports but even more by the presence of shared love and laughter.

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Saffron Walkling:* *Coriolanus*, Edinburgh International Festival. Dir. Lin Zhaohua, 20-21 August 2013.

A Chinese *Coriolanus* and British Reception: A Play Out of Context?

Lin Zhaohua's *Coriolanus*, translated by Ying Roucheng, and retitled in Chinese as *Great General Kou Liulan*, was originally performed by the Beijing People's Art Theatre¹ in the Chinese capital in 2007. It played at the Edinburgh International Festival last August for "two days only" – and four thousand ticket holders came to see it. Born in 1936 and emerging as a director after the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, Lin is now recognized as "one of the most innovative and sought-after stage directors in contemporary China" (Fei 179). No wonder that the British media and audiences turned to this production, or so it seems, to learn about the world's new Superpower as much as to go to see a play by Shakespeare. Dominic Cavendish in *The Daily Telegraph* described it as being a milestone "on that all-important journey towards better cross-cultural understanding" ("Edinburgh Festival 2013: The Tragedy of Coriolanus, Playhouse, review") while Lyn Gardner of *The Guardian* complained that it seemed "determined to offer no comment on the society that spawned it" ("The Tragedy of Coriolanus – Edinburgh Festival 2013 review").

This ethnographic gaze is not surprising. During my interview with Lin Zhaohua in 2011, when I was in Beijing researching his work on Shakespeare appropriation, he told me excitedly that he had just been in discussion with "a man from Edinburgh" (personal communication, 2011). But how would *Coriolanus* fare when transferred to the Scottish stage, my Chinese interpreter wondered afterwards? "Will Westerners be able to understand him?" she asked me. Alexa (Alex) Huang argues that touring performances at international festivals of intercultural Shakespeare, and particularly East Asian Shakespeare, are inevitably used "to interrogate Asian and Shakespearean idioms as cultural signifiers" (Huang, "What Country, Friends, Is This?" 54). Whether the reviewers of Lin's Edinburgh *Coriolanus* loved it or loathed it, each response essentially revolved around the same question: to what extent did this recognizable Shakespeare play give Western spectators an understanding of contemporary Chinese politics and culture?²

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¹ Hereafter BPAT.

² Of course, by having focused primarily on reviews in the mainstream British media, I have ignored the views of a sizable percentage of the audience: the many young mainland Chinese students who came, not only to see a famous British play by a famous Chinese director, but also to get cut-price tickets to see their favourite bands. The student concession tickets at the Edinburgh Festival were a fraction of the price of concert tickets in Beijing.

Resisting Maoism in late communist Chinese theatre³

Most strikingly for Western audiences, used to the “peony-strewn chinoiserie” of touring productions by China’s National Theatre or Ballet (Dickson) or the Royal Shakespeare Company’s recent adaptation of the Chinese classic *The Orphan of Zhao*, in Lin’s *Coriolanus* there were none of the painted faces, elaborate embroidered costumes or acrobatics associated with traditional Chinese theatre forms. Instead, Chinese actors in modernist costumes walked about on the stage and engaged in “spoken” drama in front of ladders propped against a high brick wall. It was bare, abstract, and denied the spectators any certainty of time or place. The citizens, dressed in uniformly loose tunics, brandished uniformly long staves, whilst an equally stylized Coriolanus strode in wearing a gleaming golden breastplate. Counterpoised to this throughout were the two distinctly urban, distinctly early twentieth-century Chinese heavy metal bands which slid in and out on either side of the stage.

It is not surprising that Lin Zhaohua was once branded a “harbinger of strangeness” and a “rebel against the classics” (Li 87). Although in the People’s Republic of China in the 1980s this was as much a political criticism as an aesthetic judgment, as any break with the Socialist Realist, Stanislavskian model of spoken drama promoted by the State was considered to be suspect. With his collaborator, the contemporary playwright Gao Xingjian, who would later win the Nobel Prize for Literature, Lin is credited with beginning the Little Theatre Movement (Zhao) “which changed the dramatic landscape” (Chen 66) establishing an existential Chinese theatre experimentalism in a culture which, for the previous decade or so of the Cultural Revolution, had been reduced to the production of eight state-approved revolutionary operas, ballets and plays. Their trilogy of contemporary plays, *Absolute Signal* (1982), *Bus Stop* (1984) and *Wild Men* (1986), inspired a generation of spoken theatre practitioners to start experimenting with non-realist forms influenced by the conventions of Chinese traditional theatre and newly rediscovered foreign avant-garde artists such as Brecht and Beckett.

However, unlike Gao, when the State’s tolerance for their work reached its limit, and the rehearsals for their fourth collaboration – *The Other Shore* – were closed down (Zhao 10), he did not retreat into self-imposed exile in Europe, but stayed living and working in the country’s political, and politically conservative, capital, turning from contemporary Chinese work to famous foreign and Chinese classics. Yet this in itself had deep cultural implications at the time. After all, it was only a dozen years earlier that theatres had been freed

³ Late communism refers to the transitional periods in China and the USSR beginning in the early 1980s with Deng Xiaoping’s Open Door Policy and Mikhail Gorbachev’s Perestroika as both societies shifted from “pure” communism to a more ambivalent, hybrid period of economic and social liberalisation.

from the restrictions enforced on them by Jiang Qing, actor, leader of the Gang of Four, Mao's wife, and orchestrator of the Cultural Revolution, who stated that:

The entire world of literature and arts was talking and producing the 'famous' (ming), the 'foreign' (yang), or the 'ancient'(gu); it was an utterly repugnant atmosphere filled with sentiments favouring the past over the present, favouring the foreign over the native, favouring the dead over the living. (Fei 167)

So, when Lyn Gardner of *The Guardian* dismissed his *Coriolanus* as “offering empty spectacle in the place of nuanced political comment and metaphor,” she was strongly upbraided in the comments section below by a young Chinese woman, writing under the username lili_peony, who had been involved in the Edinburgh tour:

I totally understand why LG, as [...] someone from the “free world” feels that the political side was sidestepped. Yes, in an ideal world, in a world of no political persecution, we'd all love to use the right of free speech and express our minds in various art forms. But hello, haven't you ever heard about all the horrible stories about what happened to people who dare to utter one word of disagreement, even just some insinuation? I think having chosen this play is one brave movement itself. (“The Tragedy of Coriolanus – Edinburgh Festival 2013 review”)

As scholars Li Ruru (*Shashibiya*) and Alexa (Alex) Huang (*Chinese Shakespeares*) have explored in relation to Shakespeare in Mainland China, and Dennis Kennedy has explored in relation to political Shakespeare behind the Iron Curtain (*Foreign Shakespeare*), sometimes simply the act of putting on a play is the political comment and metaphor. Lin Zhaohua is a complex case because of his longevity and status. The bad-boy of Chinese theatre also rose, at one stage, to become the vice-President of the Beijing People's Art Theatre. For me, what is often most intriguing is how practitioners appear to work within the restraints of the system, yet encode their work with slippery, ambivalent details that to outsiders of that system may seem “opaque” or simply absurd (as opposed to the obviously political absurd).

Lin Zhaohua argues that

I don't like politics. Nor do I like to let ideology dominate the content of art. Art is art itself. I would not add ideological views into art. My works serve neither for Shakespeare nor ideology but only myself. They convey what I would like to say. (Lin)

To ask an artist if they produce “political theatre” in China is to suggest that the drama and the artists have been appropriated by the State as mouthpieces

for Party propaganda, and is, therefore, an affront to their sense of artistic integrity. During Lin's youth, his entire training had been dominated by the Maoist philosophy of the arts, formulated at the Yan'an Forum in 1942, indeed these talks "have remained the single most important document, an 'ideological guide' for the Chinese Communist Party in regard to matters of arts and literature" (Fei, 129). According to Mao Zedong:

All dark forces endangering the masses of the people must be exposed, while all revolutionary struggles of the masses must be praised – this is the basic task of all revolutionary artists and writers. (Fei, 138)

Lin Zhaohua repeatedly insists that he is *not* a political director, yet *Coriolanus* is undeniably one of Shakespeare's most overtly political tragedies, and the fact that it is variously interpreted as a critique of the abuse of autocratic power or as a warning against the fickleness of the masses is significant here. Translated by his mentor, actor Ying Ruocheng, just before the latter's death in 2003, this *Coriolanus* does not set out to offer easy answers, and anyone who came hoping to see a simple critique of power relations between the Chinese government and the citizens in today's People's Republic would be left unsatisfied.

Ying's posthumously published autobiography *Voices Carry: Behind Bars and Backstage During China's Revolution and Reform* reveals in a very personal story the tensions that artists and intellectuals have had to struggle with throughout the second half of the twentieth century, as he was imprisoned for three years in 1968, at the height of the Cultural Revolution. He reveals how, after his arrest, he was continually questioned about Lin Zhaohua's suspected involvement with "a supposedly secret society within the Red Guards that had diabolical designs on the CCP and Mao himself" and how the Party interrogators "thought that Lin was involved because he was a leader among the younger men" at the theatre (Ying and Conceison 56-57). It is, I would argue, the very ambiguity over where the director's and translator's political sympathies lie that make this production from China so intriguing and nuanced. What is clear, both from the details of his interview with me, and his post-Cultural Revolution career path, is that Lin Zhaohua, from the beginning of his directing career thirty years ago, had consciously and publically set himself up in opposition to the now outdated Maoist doctrine of the arts: "The slogan for the Communist Party is that 'art should serve the working class.' This is nonsense. Art serves the intellectuals" (Lin). Because theatre experimentalism in China was regarded as a "decadent" form (Zhao), for an "elitist," educated audience (Zhang and Schecher), his protest against cultural indoctrination has not needed to be through overt political statements, dramatic or otherwise, but through a quiet re-appropriation of theatrical form as primarily art-for-art's-sake.

Chinese Intraculturalism

The most accessible innovation for the Edinburgh audience was Lin Zhaohua's incorporation of two Beijing bands, one heavy metal, the other more indie rock, into BPAT's production. These bands were used, not only as incidental music but, as commentators have put it, as a metaphorical "battle of the bands" (Dickson) between Coriolanus/the Romans and Aufidius/the Volscians. From the moment that the citizens first invaded the stage, simultaneously surging in from both backstage and the aisles, a frenzied, guitar accompaniment rocked the auditorium as the musicians joined them to take over the centre of the space. "Throughout history, there has always been conflict between the ruling class and the people, and there always will be," explained Lin Zhaohua. He continued:

I like rock music and because I need to show the conflict between the ruling classes and the people, I felt rock music was the best to show this.
(MTVIggy)

"Heavy Rock Coriolanus Turns up Volume at Edinburgh Festival" shouted the BBC headline. Andrew Dickson of *The Guardian*, veteran reviewer of the World Shakespeare Festival and Globe to Globe, loved it, describing it as surprising, gnarly, and as adding "volcanic energy" when the bands Miserable Faith and Suffocated "slide in periodically from the wings and punctuate the action with frenzied surges of nu-metal" (Dickson). Cavendish of *The Telegraph*, in another thoughtful review found it an "arresting concept" evoking "China's tumultuous embrace of Western influences" ("Edinburgh Festival 2013: The Tragedy of Coriolanus, Playhouse, review"). Gardner, no doubt placing the conceit in the category of "empty spectacle," showed her disdain by barely mentioning it.

Many reviewers centred their analyses of the rock bands on this perception of Western influence, however. In fact, Brian G Cooper of *The Stage* felt that the production was altogether too Western, complaining that in Lin's *Coriolanus*, the "uniquely Chinese theatrical influences are conspicuously absent" throughout (Cooper). Yet Chinese theatre has several distinct theatrical traditions. These include puppet theatre and traditional Chinese theatre or *xiqu*, such as Beijing Opera. Since the early 1900s, Chinese spoken theatre or *huaju*, although originally a Western import, has also been central to Chinese culture, with many of China's most important playwrights during the twentieth century choosing to write for this rather than for indigenous forms.

In recent years, however, contemporary directors have overtly experimented with "intercultural and intracultural" hybridity, especially for touring productions (Li, *Richard III*) and this has developed certain "chinoiserie" expectations about "authenticity" in the British audiences who go to see them. Director Wang Xiaoying's *Richard III* by the National Theatre of China was one

of the hits of the Globe to Globe Festival in 2012, partly because of the way in which he incorporated elements of Beijing Opera into a spoken drama. Speaking of his influences and aims for his adaptation, he said:

I saw the original *Richard III* play last year in Beijing starring [Hollywood actor] Kevin Spacey, which was fabulous and remained true to Shakespeare's original work. However, the [World Shakespeare Festival] is a platform for different countries to showcase their own culture. I believe that other countries will also fuse unique cultural elements into Shakespeare's plays. (Wang)

Cooper was perhaps hoping for such clear signs of fusion in Lin's *Coriolanus*, and may have been disappointed that the "exotic" traces of this traditional theatre were replaced by what he saw as a Western norm. Nevertheless, although the intracultural elements in Lin's work are less obvious and less traditional than Wang's, there was something in these rock bands that was fundamentally Chinese. Firstly, they reminded me of the musicians in Beijing Opera, who often sit onstage, visible to the audience (Yang). And while British audiences expect lutes and flutes to accompany Shakespeare, Beijing Opera goes for clashing cymbals (if not thrashing guitars) whenever a General or king enters the scene (Yang 84). Could this supposedly Western-style production be rather more Chinese than we give it credit for? Furthermore, rock music in China has a political heritage. Its first post-Cultural Revolution rock god, Cui Jian, entertained the students in Tiananmen Square, his "Nothing to My Name" becoming part of the soundtrack to the demonstrations. *Time Out* noted that, "Lyrically opaque, it conveyed a sense of longing that enabled it to be interpreted as a love song or a plea for political solidarity" and is "the anthem around which widespread agitation for greater freedoms in China first coalesced" (*Time Out*). Even as late as December 2013, Cui Jian had pressure put on him by Chinese State television to remove the song from his set for the annual Chinese New Year Gala. He withdrew from the programme in protest (Chinese rock star Cui Jian quits New Year show over Tiananmen song).

Play out of context?

Dickson was at an advantage when he wrote his review – *The Guardian* had sent him to Beijing to interview the master dramaturge Lin Zhaohua in his own theatrical space. But he also did his homework, seeking out answers to the things he did not know or did not immediately understand. This could not be said of most of the reviewers on BBC Radio 4's *Saturday Review from the Edinburgh Festival*, who, it appeared, had not even done a preliminary internet search of their subject before attempting to analyse it for the nation. Tom Sutcliffe, hosting, described Lin's *Coriolanus* as

a very dull production. Pu Cunxin [as Coriolanus] comes to the front of the stage and many of the scenes are blocked geometrically so the characters are all speaking out at us, not addressing the characters that they are actually talking to in those scenes, and it gave it a very rigid, very formal feel which I felt just drained all the excitement out of it. (Sutcliffe)

Pu Cunxin, one of China's leading actors of stage and screen, and Lin Zhaohua's long-term collaborator, was "a bit RSC," conceded David Schneider on the *Saturday Review* panel, "a bit RSC meaning he loves the costume, he loves the swagger, the swish of the cloak and standing with one leg forward and leaning on it". Sutcliffe took this up: "It's a very old kind of actor manager style. Or it looks that way to us" (Edinburgh Festival Special).

Ay, there's the rub. It looks that way to us. Martin Hoyle writing in the *FT* saw "rhetorical moments" which found "the individual actor caught in an attitude that fleetingly resembles the pose of a Victorian theatrical print or cut-out character for a toy theatre" (Hoyle). And those fleeting resemblances were certainly there. But that was not all that was there. In the swagger, the swish of the cloak, the fixed postures, were echoes of other generals from other Chinese traditions. In Beijing Opera, for example, "As soon as a player enters the stage, he or she must firstly stop and present himself or herself to the audience by striking a pose known as *liangxiang*" (Yang 79). Likewise, that aura of disengagement which had so disconcerted Sutcliffe, once inspired Brecht, who developed his concept of the alienation or V-Effect, after watching a performance by the Beijing Opera star Mei Lanfang.⁴

The *Saturday Review* panellists were quite right about the crowd scenes, though. These scenes which must have been so electrifying in Beijing were indeed "limp" (Sutcliffe). Mostly young, middle class looking girls and boys with shiny hair, the citizens resembled overseas students rather than democracy protesters or rioting peasants; and, it turns out, that due to funding limitations for the flights to Scotland, this was exactly what they were. Lili_peony, commenting on Lyn Gardner's review, argues that, with one hour's training and one rehearsal, these locally recruited Chinese extras from Scotland's universities were actually pretty good in the circumstances, if not as "menacing" as Gardner would have liked ("The Tragedy of Coriolanus – Edinburgh Festival 2013 review"). Thus Sutcliffe was able to introduce his BBC review with the statement that

the production seems to studiously avoid any allusion to popular discontent in China or any direct suggestion that a notionally socialist country might have its own patrician class. (Sutcliffe)

⁴ Lin's later work is not ideologically Brechtian, however, and his and Ying's *Coriolanus*, although engaging with alienation aesthetically and thematically, resists any clear binary.

Yet in the original Beijing production Lin had controversially deployed one hundred angry, untrained migrant farm labourers as the citizens, their everyday work clothes clearly visible beneath their costumes, and the audience laughing uncomfortably when Coriolanus asked the citizens' representatives, "Have you washed?" (Shakespeare and Ying). Although urban unrest is rare in China these days, there are frequent clashes in rural areas between displaced peasants and the government endorsed companies that take their land. So this casting choice alone, according to Shen Lin, professor at the Central Drama Academy in Beijing, clearly placed "Roman history in the context of China today" (Shen 229). In his interview with me Lin explained,

In *Coriolanus*, I was influenced by what happens around us. I cast real *min gong* [migrant farm labourers] to express my ideas about society – it was my way to express who are the real heroes. (Lin)

As always, this enigmatic answer was not expanded on. Just who does Lin consider to be the heroes of his society? Is it the Great General? Or is it the People? My interpreter avoided conveying any ambivalence in his tone, and reminded me that "New China was built with the peasants' hands" (Lin).

However, Chinese of an older generation, such as William Sun (Sun Huizhu), Shanghai Theatre Academy "professor at large" and a respected playwright/director himself, had a different perspective, tackling the idea of heroes in his article for the *Coriolanus* programme:

My guess is that the translator Ying Ruocheng and the director Lin Zhaohua's shared interest in this play, about a leader devoured by the masses he arrogantly believes he is leading, could be attributed to their experience in China's Cultural Revolution. (Sun)

In fact, in China this production generated heated political debate, as demonstrated by the range of responses reported by Shen in his chapter in *Shakespeare in Asia* (What use Shakespeare? China and Globalization). Were Lin and his collaborators taking "an anti-socialist and anti-democratic stance against the Chinese Revolution?" Were they propagating "hierarchism and neo-conservatism?" Or were they critiquing "the corrosive power of cultural plebeianism" and venting "long pent-up frustrations with the damnable system of the People's Art" (Shen 230-231)?

On *Saturday Review* only David Schneider responded to this:

There was for me a frisson about the politics though – there was that scene where they do discuss whether the herd, the populace, should have any rights at all and I think that if you do contextualise a Chinese director putting on *Coriolanus* and letting it speak for itself, for me there was a glow in those scenes. (Sutcliffe)

Alexa Huang contends that “The dynamics of British reviews of intercultural performance are symptomatic of a tendency to read contemporary Asian arts in political ways in the West.” What is more she observes that “the patterns of reception history of touring productions also point toward a lingering ideological investment in fixed notions of cultural authenticity” (Huang, 2013, 58). However, in this case it appears that sometimes the reviewers’ inability to read the politics in contemporary Chinese performance led to their sense that the production was therefore inauthentic, both culturally and politically.

Conclusion

Western reviews of Lin’s *Coriolanus* forces us to ask whether, therefore, there is a problem with the production itself, the place in which the production takes place or the inability of the audience to read the cultural signifiers? The innovations in Lin’s *Coriolanus* can be read as a response to the changes in late communist Chinese society. However, as Yan Haiping has pointed out, such readings often only make sense in the context of the “home” culture’s “socially bound performative collectivity”:

Theatre audiences [are] socially bound and defined groups and theatrical experiences [are] socially anchored events [that] make the ahistorical, asocial, and ultimately transcendent humanist aesthetics hardly self-evident. Such a sociohistorically anchored nature is most strongly demonstrated in the history of modern Chinese theatre and the development of its aesthetics. (Yan 109)

When a play is performed “out of context,” such as at an international festival, the danger is that the historical and social significance of a production gets “lost in translation” or becomes “opaque” if the host culture audience is not familiar with the cultural aesthetics of the particular production or if, as in this case, those aesthetics do not match preconceived notions about Chinese theatre. This can be seen in several of the responses to Lin’s *Coriolanus* in Edinburgh featured above: on one hand such an ethnographic approach to intercultural theatre appears to open up a cross-cultural dialogue, yet the miscommunications that occur can end up telling us more about the anxieties and prejudices of the host country. To conclude, I end on an unanswered question: should we judge a production as a failure if we do not understand it, as did some reviewers, or is it an opportunity to learn, and learn to appreciate a little more about what theatre is in the world today, as did so many other reviewers and spectators? Maybe both approaches are flawed, because both reduce the production to little more than an ethnographic curiosity.

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PRODUCTION IMAGES



Actor Pu Cunxin as Coriolanus from 'Chinese Coriolanus at Edinburgh Festival' Vimeo posted by KT Wong Foundation. Available from <http://vimeo.com/73625869> [accessed 17/03/2014]
Embedded still



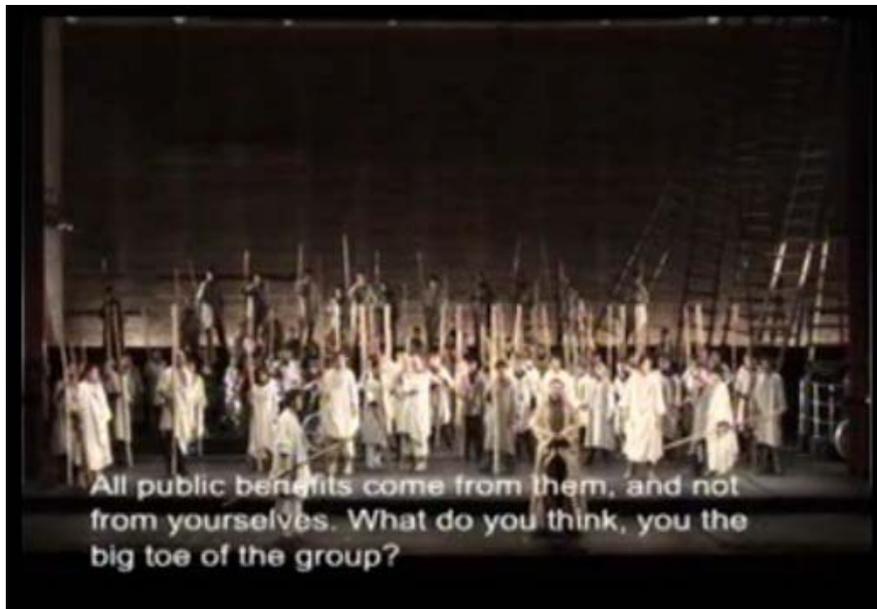
Beijing bands Suffocated and Miserable Faith in rehearsal in Edinburgh from 'Chinese Coriolanus at Edinburgh Festival' Vimeo posted by KT Wong Foundation. Available from <http://vimeo.com/73625869> [accessed 17/03/2014] Moving image



Cast and musicians, 'Coriolanus' from '2013 The Tragedy of Coriolanus' YouTube posted by EdintFest. Available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjKaUmLvQII>



Migrant workers as the citizens confront Pu Cunxin as Coriolanus from the 2007 production at the Beijing People's Art Theatre 'Coriolanus' Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive. Available from <http://a-s-i-a-web.org/>



BPAT cast including migrant workers as the citizens from the 2007 production at the Beijing People's Art Theatre 'Coriolanus' Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive. Available from <http://a-s-i-a-web.org/>