

Varsha Panjwani*

Not Minding the Gap: Intercultural Shakespeare in Britain

Abstract: The article takes issue with the perceived space/gap between the multiple identities of mixed-heritage groups, as most of these people often pick and choose elements from all of their identities and amalgamate them into a cross-cultural whole. In recent years, such mixed-heritage groups in the U.K. have increasingly found cultural expression in Shakespeare. Focusing specifically on a number of recent Shakespearean productions, by what I term Braisian (my preferred term for British-Asians as it suggests a more fused identity) theatre companies, the article demonstrates how these productions employ hybrid aesthetic styles, stories, and theatre forms to present a layered Braisian identity. It argues that these productions not only provide a nuanced understanding of the intercultural map of Britain but are also a rich breeding ground for innovative Shakespeare productions in the U.K.

Keywords: Braisian (British Asian), Shakespeare, mixed-heritage, identity, intercultural, Tribe Arts, Tara Arts, Phizzical, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Cymbeline*, *Darokhand*

What do a coconut, a banana, and an Oreo cookie have in common? All these terms are racist epithets used in Britain to describe a person of mixed-heritage, a naturalised citizen, or a second—or third—generation migrant. These epithets imply that such people are brown/yellow/black on the outside and white on the inside. The choice of these terms betrays a deep-seated fear of mixing, as if it were somehow preferable if these people with brown/yellow/black skin were entirely brown/yellow/black in their attitudes, preferences, and politics. Moreover, the identities of these people are imagined as easily separable, as if one part of their heritage is only skin-deep, and as soon as the brown husk, yellow peel, or the black biscuit is stripped away, pure unadulterated white centres will emerge. Racist vocabulary aside, the official identifiers of this demographic are the following terms: British-Asian, British-Chinese, and British-African. Those who are identified as such resist the use of these terms and yet they have popular and official currency. These terms imply that their

* Boston University (London).

identities can be neatly divided on either side of the hyphen, as if cautioning these people, like the often repeated announcement on the London Underground trains to “mind the gap.” Yet, people of mixed-heritage challenge this gap or space as they often pick and choose elements from their plural heritage and then create unique fused identities which question the very idea and definition of Britishness.

In an age of globalisation and mass migration, it should be easier to conceive of a national identity such as ‘Britishness’ as a process instead of a given—as a “fabric to be woven” instead of “a mineral to be excavated” (Appiah). Due to the cultural capital of Shakespeare, the phenomenon and promotion of Global Shakespeare raised hopes that it would lead the way in problematizing the notion of national identity as fixed and instead help us to see identity and nationality as an invention or a creation. However, this potential has not been realised fully as “diasporic and minority Shakespeares” and artists “who work with more than one language or situate their performances in the diaspora” are “less frequently studied” (Huang 283). Consequently, “critics are ill-equipped to analyze works that do not fit neatly in geopolitical maps” (Huang 281). This certainly seems to be the case in Britain where Iqbal Khan’s 2012 production of *Much Ado About Nothing* for the Royal Shakespeare Company (henceforth RSC) received a lukewarm reception. For his production, Khan directed an exclusively Brasian (my preferred term for British-Asian as it suggests a more fused identity) cast. Huang observes how:

Performed in English by a cast of second-generation British Indian actors to Bollywood-inspired music, the production received mixed reviews because the press compared it to two productions from the Indian Subcontinent at the London Globe during the same time period: Arpana Company’s *All’s Well That Ends Well* in Gujarati and Company Theatre’s *Twelfth Night* in Hindi. The touring productions carried with them the cachet of ethnic and cultural authenticity. Khan’s *Much Ado* had rough edges and was not quite polished, but the diasporic identity of the British Indian actors also complicated the reception of their performance (281).

This attitude points to the fact that the press desired a Shakespeare production that could be clearly identified as pure Indian or unadulterated British rather than an amalgam. Therefore Huang has stressed that this is an “area that calls for more scholarly attention” (283). My article answers Huang’s call and examines the messy, chaotic, and creative Braisian Shakespeare productions.

In 2015, Ajay Chowdhury directed *Merchant of Wembley*—an adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* which relocates the play to a place based on Wembley in London where 66.1% of the population is Brasian. By setting the drama in an imaginary version of this place, the production explored the fractures within the Braisian communities in London. In the same year, Tara

Arts set *Macbeth* within a Brasian family and mapped the supernatural and the aristocratic worlds of the play onto the two worlds that Brasians carry with them—"the world they inhabit" and "the world they or their forebears left behind" (Verma, "Director's Note"). Two years before this, in 2013, Samir Bhamra had directed *Cymbeline* for Phizzical Productions which was "the longest tour for a play by a British Asian theatre company" (Phizzical, 2013). Although all these productions circulate in my article, its central case-study is the most recent Shakespeare production by a young Brasian company, Tribe Arts. Co-founders and Artistic Directors, Tajpal Rathore and Samran Rathore, describe the company as "a philosophically-inspired, radical-political theatre company" which aims to "amplify the stories and voices of the current Black and Asian generation" in Britain.¹ The production which I discuss is a new work, *Darokhand*, which combines six Shakespeare plays—*Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Tempest*, and *Othello*. The full-length play is still in production so the company offered the audience a rare opportunity to see a trailer by performing six scenes from the play.

This article will offer a rhizomatic² approach to studying Brasian Shakespeare productions in order to demonstrate how intercultural Shakespeare can help us to see a way out of a fixation with pure identities as not only has this attitude led to some of the most heinous atrocities of the twentieth century, but it is increasingly taking hold of post-Brexit Britain.³

"Infinite Variety": Multiple Identities

Designer Chris Dudgeon drew upon both Western and South Asian influences to give rich and complex identities to the characters in *Darokhand*. As a whole, the production employed an Indo-Saracenic style—a blend of Hindu and Islamic artistic styles from the Mughal period in India, mixed further with European Gothic elements.⁴ A particularly interesting costume was that of Zohra Begum,

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Tajpal Rathore and Samran Rathore are from a hitherto unpublished interview that I conducted after seeing the showcase production. The interview took place in Leeds on 26 May 2016. Also, as the artistic directors have the same surname, I am using their full names throughout the article.

² I borrow this term from Deleuze and Guattari who outline how "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be" (5). With its emphasis on multiplicity and interconnectedness, a rhizomatic approach lends itself well to an investigation of intercultural work.

³ Brexit refers to Britain's exit from the European Union in 2016.

⁴ The Mughal dynasty ruled most of northern India from the early sixteenth century for over two centuries. For Indo-Saracenic style (primarily an architectural style), see Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj*.



Fig. 1. Zohra Begum's Costume © Tribe Arts

a character inspired by Lady Macbeth. As the costume sketch shows, Zohra Begum wore a headdress which consisted of a red turban with a “chunni” [scarf] trailing behind her. While her turban was Mughal inspired, the black corset she wore was steampunk-gothic with multiple metallic belts and buckles. This was paired with a long, embroidered skirt that was reminiscent of a Mughal “lehenga”. Her jewellery, too, was both Mughal and Gothic at once—the former because it was worn on the forehead as was traditional with the Mughal women and the latter as it went right across the face like so much gothic metal and chain jewellery. Also worth noting are the henna tattoos on Zohra Begum’s arms—a detail which was not incorporated into the showcase due to time constraints but which can be seen in the costume sketch. These allude to Mughal makeup, as henna was traditionally applied on the hands of Mughal women in intricate patterns, but also reference Gothic tones as the henna used would be blood red in colour. In one last transnational touch, the embroidered “lehenga” also had plaid border sown on to it, reminding the audience of Lady Macbeth’s Scottish origins. Thus the costume thoroughly resisted any attempt to identify the wearer with one particular culture, asserting instead that Zohra Begum is Gothic, Mughal, and Scottish simultaneously as her multi-layered religious and national identity was consciously stitched into the very fabric of her dress and reflected in her jewellery and make-up.

This is significant in a climate in which what Asian women wear or do not wear is subject to the greatest examination. An increasing number of European countries have banned Islamic clothing for women such as the “burka” [garment covering entire body], the “niqab” [scarf covering head and face], or the “hijab” [scarf covering hair and neck]. The Netherlands, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Italy, and Spain have imposed full or partial bans (Sanghani) and recently, the UK, too has called for such prohibitions.⁵ Ostensibly the practice of wearing such clothing is pitted against national values and the bans are advertised as a security measure or touted as a fight against women’s oppression.

In reality, however, these bans have often succeeded only in inciting racist attacks on women choosing to wear either of these items of clothing. To quote just two of the many examples, armed French police confronted a woman on a beach in Nice, making her remove her “burkini” [modest burka style swimwear] while people shouted “go home” at her (Quinn) and a British man ripped a “niqab” off a woman in a shopping centre in the U.K. as he told her to “live by British rules” (Armstrong). What both the law-makers and the haters often overlook, however, is that wearing a burka does not mean that these women do not ascribe to the values of the country in which they live. Often they

⁵ Sample these newspaper articles: Graham, “British Public Back a Ban on Burka by Two to One, Poll Finds,” Stone, “British Public Overwhelmingly Support Banning the Islamic Burqa by Two to One.”

are as proud of their national identities as their religious ones. For instance, in a dance troupe, 'We're Muslim Don't Panic', the dancers wear traditional Islamic garments including "hijabs" and "niqabs" as they dance to hip-hop. They demonstrate that wearing Islamic clothes is as much a part of their heritage as American hip-hop (*The New York Times*). To take another example, Faiza M. was denied French citizenship for wearing the "burka" in 2008, even though she was a fluent speaker of French, married to a French national and had three French-born children (Crumley). This assumption that a "burka" wearing woman might not feel as connected to her English/Welsh/Irish/Scottish identity as her Islamic one is encouraged by mainstream British media which neglects the "complexities of multi-layered identities and cultural mixes" (Parekh 168) when it comes to the portrayal of ethnic minorities.

In another example from the Tribe Arts production, the multi-layered identities were not limited to costume choices but were a feature of the entire imaginary kingdom, Darokhand, in which the play was set. The first scene itself signalled that Darokhand's citizenship model was fluid—one did not need to be a particular religion or share a common history to belong here. As we entered the theatre, there was a faint smell of incense hanging in the air. Once the audience was seated, a projection screen in the theatre showed a crypt and we learnt that the king of Darokhand has been recently buried here. The king's tomb was carved out in marble and had an effigy on it portraying the reclining king with his hands joined in prayer. At first, the elaborate effigy was a curious sight in this court where characters have Islamic sounding names such as Prince Haider and General Khyber because Islam forbids the erection of effigies on tombs. This was further complicated because the screen world spilled onto the stage and we saw characters emerging from the wings in pairs and threes to pay homage to the dead king which they enacted by lighting candles and incense in front of the screen. All this was accompanied by Niraj Chag's music score which incorporated the chants of "Om Shanti". This is significant as the lighting of candles and incense to the chants of "Om Shanti" is a decidedly Hindu ritual. Therefore, the Hindu prayers offered in front of a tomb effigy (more likely to be found in the crypt of a church) by characters with Islamic names created an imaginary place where interfaith rituals are the norm and interculturalism is a given.

Phizzical's production of *Cymbeline* in 2013, too, had blurred such neat lines of religious and national identities. While Phizzical's Innojaan (Inogen) prayed in a temple and was compared to Sita (a Hindu goddess), her father was called Cymbeline which is not a Hindu or an Islamic name. Her step-mother was referred to as Malika, which is an Urdu/Islamic word for queen and her son was named Cloten which is, again, not an Asian name. The other identities were similarly blurred. Sherridin (Posthumus) was Islamic as his name signifies and he was also seen trying to pray on a mat which further cemented his

identification with Islam. However, he got married to Innojaan in a temple and give her a “mangalsutra” [a necklace of gold and black beads given by grooms to their brides] and both of these things are part of Hindu traditions. The artistic director of Phizzical, Samir Bhamra, explained that he was dissatisfied with the fact that people in Britain are getting very parochial and that they often forget the mix of different religions that make up the British population. He cites his own lineage as an example: he is half-Sikh, half-Islamic, and he resided in Kenya before settling in Britain. So, he insists that he blurs “different cultures, different religions, different languages in [his] work because [he feels] that that represents us in this country” (Bhamra, interview for *theatreVoice*).

“Her Tongue Cut Out”: Mingling Languages

“Ohre taal mile nadi ke jal me
 nadi mile sagar me
 sagar mile kaun se jal me koi jane na”
 [Oh the pond mingles with the water of the river
 The river flows into the sea
 Which water does the sea mix with—no one really knows]

The lyrics of this song from the 1968 Bollywood movie, *Anokhi Raat*, lend themselves well to the Brasian condition. Resembling nothing as much as the flows and currents of water bodies, it is not easy for them to identify and separate their mingled identities. No wonder, then, that this song was incorporated into Tara Arts’ (the company who performed *Macbeth* in 2015) *Journey to the West* trilogy about diasporic voyages.

Brasian productions of Shakespeare also often include Bollywood songs. Shishir Kurup’s *Merchant of Vembley*, for instance, entertained its audiences by featuring a Bollywood hit song from the movie *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani*, as an attempt to capture the spirit of the Indian festival of colours, *Holi*, in their production. Often these songs are lifted wholesale from Bollywood and left untranslated. Tribe Arts also included a song in the scene in which an aristocratic party assembled to see a “mujra” [an evening entertainment of song and dance performed by courtesans to entertain their clients]. This song was a specially commissioned, newly written piece—in Urdu. In other words, despite it being an original song, it was not written in English. This led to a heated debate during the feedback session which followed the scene as some audience members suggested that the company should consider translating the song during performance, either by including surtitles or by performing the song in English altogether, because the song’s lyrics were integral to the play’s narrative. For example, the line, “Khuda jaane kyun duniya mein Ishq ka mool

nahin hai/Zamaane ko humara Bhi ishq qubool nahin hai” [God knows why the world devalues love/ the society denies our love], foreshadowed the tragedy of the love affair between Princess Kumari (based on Juliet) and General Khyber (partially based on Romeo), who were members of the aristocratic party assembled on the stage.

It is also worth pausing to consider another paragraph in the song:

“Jo zubaan se bayaan nahi hote
 Unhi lavzon se ashq bante hain
 Ho Ashq jo ankhone se bhi na chalkein
 Ashq jo ankhone se bhi na chalkein
 Un ashkon ko Ishq kehte hain”
 [The words left unspoken
 Mutate into tears
 The tears left unseen
 Is just another name for love]

Here, a strong connection is made between the alliterative sounds of “ashq” [tears] and “ishq” [love] further underscoring love’s sweet sorrow; the song also captures the poetry and punning of Shakespeare’s language. I argued that it would be a shame if the audience left with the impression of a beautiful performance but failed to appreciate the ways in which the song was linked to the storyline and language. So, I, too, wished that the song had been translated.

The other half of the audience and the artistic directors, however, disagreed with this as they stated that there was a clear political reason for insisting on incorporating an Urdu song within the performance. In doing this, Tribe Arts strongly followed in the lineage of BrAsian companies which fuse the aural elements of their shows to give their audiences a flavour of the diverse cross-cultural linguistic experience of BrAsians. Tajpal Rathore argued that an English song here would be as unnatural as BrAsians speaking in only one language. He asserted that bilingualism is part and parcel of BrAsian lives and if they are to have true self-representation then such multilingualism should be reflected on the stage. His argument echoes the practice of Tara Arts which similarly insists on a polyphony of languages on stage.

Explaining Tara Arts’ politics, Dominic Hingorani asserts that the use of hybridised language in the company’s shows “de-centred the privileged position of English speakers so that the non-Asian speaker experiences moments of marginalisation.” This was not “out of ‘revenge’ but as a means of marking and simultaneously transgressing the concept of discrete cultural borders” (*British Asian Theatre* 146). Samran Rathore related an anecdote to illustrate how these moments of “marginalisation” might not only destabilise the central position of English speakers but also incite curiosity in non-Asian speakers. He told me how he had recently been to the theatre and heard a Swahili song that he could not get

out of his head. Obsessed with the song and not a native Swahili speaker, he contacted colleagues and searched and researched, and did not rest easy until he could acquire at least a gist of its meaning. In this case, then, he had experienced “marginalisation” but it led to him learning more about a culture. So, he hoped that not translating the song in performance would demand a more active role from the audience and lead to mutual cultural exchange. Artistic director of Tara Arts, Jatinder Verma (“The Challenge of Bilingual” 198), provides yet another perspective. According to him the performance of Asian languages alongside English is necessary as this hybridised language is “part of the linguistic map of modern Britain...and cannot be expected to be absent from modern British theatre.” So, for him, this hybridized language is not only about BrAsian self-representation or cultural exchange but also a way to represent modern Britain itself better.

“I Long to Hear the Story of Your Life”: Intercultural Stories

In Spring 2016, I was teaching *Romeo and Juliet* when an interesting conversation took place in the seminar. A British-Chinese student told the group about *The Butterfly Lovers* - a tale that shares many elements of *Romeo and Juliet*. Her input encouraged a similar contribution from a British-Indian student who said that she had grown up hearing stories of *Heer-Ranjha* and *Laila-Majnu*—pairs of lovers who shared Romeo and Juliet’s tragic fate. We then debated why these Chinese and Indian/Pakistani legends were not as well-known world-wide as Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. We discussed the many factors involved, including colonialism and supremacy of the English language, but it also unleashed a desire in my students to explore more stories from their mixed cultural backgrounds and to then trace parallels.

Tribe Arts tapped into this desire of BrAsians, who feel only partially reflected in exclusively Western stories and narratives, by fusing legends from East and West. A particular instance of this is a scene which weaved two Shakespeare tragedies with Indian and Pakistani legends. In *Darokhand*, General Khyber persuaded Haider (Hamlet) to attend the “mujra” in an attempt to cheer Haider after the death of his father. Like the arrival of the players in *Hamlet*, this provided an opportunity for an inset performance with an onstage audience. The “mujra”, however, also doubled up as the “masked ball” during which Romeo and Juliet meet as it was at this event that General Khyber set eyes on Princess Kumari, leading to love at first sight. In this scene, the company were harking back to the story of Salim and Anarkali, whose love defied society. According to historical legend, the sixteenth-century Mughal prince (Salim) crossed the class divide when he fell in love with the court dancer (Anarkali). When his father (Akbar) opposed his love, Salim waged a war against him. This is

a tremendously popular story in Asian culture, in part because it inspired the hit Bollywood period-drama film, *Mughal-e-Azam*. First released in black-and-white and then remastered and released in colour, the film has inspired a number of homages and parodies. Lines from a song in the movie, “jab pyaar kiya to darna kya” [why fear when one has fallen in love], have become a part of South-Asian phraseology. Significantly, in this film, the lovers are separated forever when Akbar plans to bury Anarkali alive and Salim believes her to be dead. The similarities with Romeo and Juliet here are striking as Shakespeare has Romeo believe that Juliet is dead and Romeo breaks into her family crypt where she has been buried. Thus, for Brasians, growing up on a staple diet of both Bollywood and Shakespeare, the Salim-Anarkali pairing is just as much of a shorthand for star-crossed love as Romeo-Juliet. Tribe Arts’ fusion, therefore, strongly resonated with the experience of being Brasian as it accessed the entire range of references that Brasians draw upon—*Mughal-e-Azam* is as much part of their cultural memory as *Romeo and Juliet*.

Phizzical’s *Cymbeline* offers another interesting parallel. In Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*, Jupiter “*descends in thunder and lightning, sitting upon an eagle*” (5.4.93–94) to offer support to Posthumus. In the *theatreVoice* interview, Bhamra revealed that he had planned to stage this scene by substituting the Hindu god, Krisna, for Jupiter. Although Bhamra was not able to include the scene due to budgetary restrictions, he elaborated that he had envisaged the scene as Krisna conversing with Arjun, a mythical warrior prince. The references are important because the episode of Arjun being instructed by Krisna on the verge of battle comes from the *Mahabharata* - a foundational text of Hindu mythology. Therefore Bhamra, too, wanted to draw upon stories of a mixed cultural heritage by combining Shakespeare with Hindu mythology.

“Suit the Action to the Word”: Theatre Praxis

It is significant to note that not only the performance, but Tribe Arts’ rehearsal practices and process of theatre making—their theatre praxis—also combines Eastern and Western influences. This was most evident in the way in which Tribe Arts directed what has become famous as the “balcony scene” from *Romeo and Juliet*. The very first time that Romeo and Juliet meet, they kiss (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* 2.1.100-109). As their relationship begins with a lip-lock, theatre and film directors often include kisses when the lovers meet in the “balcony scene.” In Tribe Arts’ production, Princess Kumari was live-projected on the screen in a balcony and General Khyber was on stage. When Princess Kumari finally joined him on the stage and the audience expected them to kiss, the latter coyly turned her head so that the kiss did not happen. Yet,

instead of a rebuttal, this action heightened the sexual tension between the lovers because shying away from a kiss is a popular Bollywood trope.

For years, Indian viewers were subjected to what has comically become known as the “head-turn”; every time that the romantic leads would come close to kissing, the heroine would shyly turn her head and the kiss would be averted. Tajpal Rathore confirmed that the entire scene had been rehearsed by taking inspiration from such Bollywood wooing scenes. The blocking and expressions were developed by watching romance routines from Indian movies in which Shah Rukh Khan is the lead actor.⁶

The opening sequence was also born out of a Bollywood practice. In the question and answer session that followed the scene, Tajpal Rathore confirmed that the first scene with ritualistic worship that finally became the funeral scene for Prince Haider’s father, was developed by thinking about the “puja” [prayer] ceremony that usually takes place before the beginning of the shooting of Bollywood films. A prayer is usually offered to Ganesha (the god of new beginnings in Hindu mythology) before the shoot for a movie begins and Tribe Arts wanted a similar start for their show. This concept was rehearsed and finally took the shape of the funeral scene of *Hamlet*. Ultimately, whether the audience sees the mirroring of Bollywood routines and traditions in the two scenes is not the point. Rather, relying on the techniques of Bollywood empowers the Brasian cast of Tribe Arts by offering a theatre praxis as unique as the fused identities of their actors.⁷

This practice can be better understood by briefly exploring the history of Brasian theatre rehearsals. In 1984, Tara Arts set out to develop a new theatre praxis that resulted in the creation of “Binglish”—“a distinct contemporary theatre praxis [...] featuring Asian and black casts, produced by independent Asian or black theatre companies [...] to directly challenge or provoke the dominant conventions of the English stage” (Verma, “Binglishing the Stage” 194). It is achieved by “the heaping together of fragments of diverse cultures” (Verma, “The Challenge of Binglish” 131) because where Brasians are concerned, “we are not talking about the subcontinent . . . nor are we talking about Britain as it is . . . it is a peculiar mix of the two” (Verma, “Staging The Asian Experience”). A key element of Binglish then is the amalgamation of

⁶ Shah Rukh Khan, nicknamed the “badshah” [king] of Bollywood, is extremely popular in the United Kingdom. In his mega-hit film, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, he popularised the character of Raj – a Brasian, living in London. In 2015, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Edinburgh. Moreover, versions of star-crossed lovers and balcony scenes feature prominently in his movies such as *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* and *Dil To Pagal Hai*.

⁷ Besides Tajpal Rathore and Samran Rathore, the cast members included Ayesha De Garci, Jyoti Lata Kainth, Mudassar Dar and Amelie Leroy – all of them have layered identities.

Western as well as Asian theatrical forms and techniques. All productions of Tara Arts since then draw on influences from and amalgamate art-forms from the two cultures. In *Macbeth*, for instance, Shalini Peiris, used a very distinctive gait and gesture when she played the Porter. Her use of posture and movement to delineate or present a character is a technique laid out in *Natyasastra*, the Indian treatise on acting dating from 200 BC, which lays great stress on the actors' physicality and contains detailed descriptions of poses and gaits for a range of characters. Tara Arts extensively uses this text, alongside other techniques, in rehearsal for creating characters. The production, however, did not stylize the movements of all characters, neither did it attempt to present a performance based exclusively on Indian theatre forms. Again, whether the audience recognised the amalgamation is only secondary to the fact that Verma tried to find a new way of rehearsal and expression as he wanted to offer his diverse actors a rehearsal and performance practice that does not put them in this "invidious position, which I think English drama schools do, of making a choice. There's no choice to be made. You don't have to choose either to be English or to be Asian, you can be both" (qtd. in Hingorani, "Ethnicity and Actor Training" 167).

Why Shakespeare?

In November 2015, when I asked Verma why he chose to direct Shakespeare, he answered "why not?"⁸ He was good-naturedly mocking me for asking this question but he was right. As a theatre director in Britain, there is a very good chance that one would be tempted to direct Shakespeare. When I put the same question to Tajpal Rathore and Samran Rathore, they said that "a lot of people we come in contact with in our industry expect our theatre to be about issues relating to terrorism, colonialism and ideas of the past. Whilst these issues inform a lot of our work, Tribe have consciously made sure we are not creatively defined in this way". Who is allowed to direct Shakespeare is an important question in this country and these directors assert their right to direct plays by a playwright who holds such a central position in British culture. In this way, they use Shakespeare in order to mainstream the British experience.

These intercultural companies, however, do not just employ Shakespeare for political purposes, but they also transform Shakespeare performance; Tara Arts Bilingualizes Shakespeare and Tribe Arts is interested in exploring Shakespeare's plays "the only way Tribe can: through our own unique

⁸ From an unpublished lecture and interview with Jatinder Verma that took place in London in November 2015.

interpretation, deliberation and techniques”.⁹ These companies, then, are leading the way for innovative Shakespeare in Britain. In other words, Shakespeare performance needs these companies as much as these companies need Shakespeare’s plays.

Access to prominent venues and festivals aside, it is not surprising that Shakespeare attracts Brazilian companies. National identities were in a flux in Shakespeare’s time as “James I’s arrival had turned England and Scotland into Britain, and Stuart panegyric repeatedly celebrated the new national name and the huge conceptual shift that it involved.” However “there were always significant gaps between the symbolism of union and the internal divisions of the British state.” Both *Cymbeline* and *Macbeth* dramatize these gaps. In *Cymbeline*, “shortfalls between the rhetoric and reality of ‘Britain’ are clearly evident” (Butler 37, 39) and in *Macbeth*, the play shifts between Scotland and England and shows how the subjects deal with these rapid changes in government and identity. Moreover, in many plays, Shakespeare discusses “the Other: Shylock, obviously, as a Jew in a Christian state; Prospero, exiled from his home; Romeo and Juliet, both as Other to each other because of their warring families and Other by dint of their love” and Hamlet as Other in a corrupt state (Verma “Classical Bilingualism in the Twenty-first Century” 30). Shakespeare’s fascination with identity politics in these plays explains why Brazilian companies utilize Shakespeare as a site for navigation of cross-cultural identities.

By providing a more accurate picture of current Britain where identities are layered, these intercultural Shakespeares are showing that there are diverse ways to be British. Perhaps it would be better to stop thinking of people with hybrid identities as coconuts, bananas, and Oreo cookies. Perhaps they can be thought of as English Breakfast tea which is composed of Assam, Ceylon and Kenya leaves. When blended together, these become so quintessentially English that it is impossible to imagine British life without it.

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⁹ Personal interview with the directors – see note above.

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