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# Of an Age, Not Just for All Time: Shakespeare's Screen Traffic in a City and Time "Out of Joint"

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**ABSTRACT**

This essay will assess the extent to which screened broadcasts of Shakespeare plays in Hong Kong contribute to a sense of cosmopolitan cultural identity in the city, and engage with current issues and events, as Shakespearean presentist theory argues. I will discuss how this relatively recent digitally mediated traffic in transnational Shakespeare, functioning as it does as a simulacrum of the physical theatre-going experience, resonates with the sociocultural ethos of Hong Kong. Like the asynchronous – as opposed to simulcast – theatre broadcast of Western Shakespeare, the time seems palpably "out of joint" to many residents of the city. A major factor affecting the continuation of Hong Kong's hitherto rich cultural life is the rapidly accelerating erosion of its autonomy and supposedly guaranteed civic freedoms, following Beijing's imposition of sweeping national security legislation. The essay discusses the significance of Shakespeare theatre broadcast in this highly charged political atmosphere in Hong Kong, with its dwindling, but stubbornly residual, cultural links to the country of the dramatist's birth. The second part will explore the local resonances of four broadcast theatre productions of Shakespeare plays in Hong Kong, *Coriolanus* and *Hamlet* (both NT Live) and *The Tempest* and *Titus Andronicus* (both RSC Live).

**KEYWORDS**

iconicity; Hong Kong theatre broadcast; remoteness; implicature; felicitous referentiality; topicality

## Introduction: Shakespeare's synchronicity on stage and screen

In his 1964 collection of essays Polish critic Jan Kott triggered the long-running and game-changing critical and creative concept of "Shakespeare Our Contemporary". However, Kott did not claim to be introducing an idea that was in any way new. Modern-dress productions in Shakespeare's own time, while not overtly proclaiming the contemporary parallels inherent in the plays' plots and characters, lent an air of immediacy to potentially allegorical stage signs and meanings in language and content. Shakespeare was able to maintain his distance from the implications of his subject-matter through connotation, as opposed to specific denotation; and where even the connotations were dangerous, as in *Antony and Cleopatra* (allegorically speaking, Essex and Elizabeth), he prudently did not attempt to produce the play until after the latter's death. This virtue born out of necessity has conferred on his plays qualities of timelessness and considerable hermeneutic scope. It is not without good reason that Ben Jonson claimed in his elegiac verse offering that prefaced the First Folio that "He was not of an age, but for all time" (lxxi, l.43), which was less inventive than it seems to us now, being a conventional trope in classical medieval and Renaissance eulogies.

While Jonson was undoubtedly prescient in his intimation of the future greatness of his "beloved" (lxxi, title) fellow poet and dramatist, we should remember that his verse encomium

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lionized his contemporary and perceived rival as a figure "to whom all scenes of Europe homage owe" (lxxi, l.44). Like that of the eulogist himself, although less directly so, Shakespeare's art captures the zeitgeist of the two vibrant decades that constituted the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean era. Thus, Janet Clare, in her study *Shakespeare's Stage Traffic,* locates the author's dramaturgy within the networks of exchange, influence and competition of the age, the traffic referring to both the artistic and the commercial negotiations, adaptations and practices of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Clearly, the "two-hours' traffic" (*Romeo and Juliet* prologue 12) of the Early Modern stage was nothing if not emblematic of its own time, despite its politically judicious representation of mostly historically or geographically remote characters and places. Periodic enforced closures of the theatres on account of plague briefly arrested, but didn't stem, this burgeoning flow of traffic.

Another couplet that occurs later in Jonson's eulogy, and is easily overlooked, suggests that the collected works of "the star of poets" represents both a rebuke and an incentive to other dramatic poets of the age: "Shine forth, thou star of poets, and with rage / Or influence chide or cheer the drooping stage" (lxxii, 77–78). Beneath this surface application of "rage and influence" Jonson also seems to be pointing to the real world that the theatre simulates. On the one hand, such "rage" may represent no more than a projection of Jonson's own towards the "money-gett, Mechanick Age" (Jonson 404, ll.51–52) onto his fellow playwright; nonetheless the couplet captures the implicit sense that Shakespeare's dramatic world portrays both an unjust, cruel universe and the means to endure it by laughing at its representation, thereby subverting the influence of the powerful and self-aggrandizing and their willing dupes.

The notion of Shakespeare's benign humanizing influence is, of course, more familiar to us than his putative rage at human duplicity and viciousness. However, his indelible stage images of unscrupulous, morally reprehensible individuals, as in *King Lear,* suggest that Jonson's use of the word should not be taken lightly. As James A. Knapp argues, "[B]y choosing to stage Gloucester's blinding, Shakespeare foregrounds the role of the popular image in inciting moral outrage, and consequently, moral action" (Knapp 9). This "stage traffic" is not designed to be appreciated by posterity; rather, it is the work of "the soul of the age" and "wonder of *our* stage" (lxxi, 17–18, my italics) deploying the narratives of "there and then" to shed critical light and make oblique commentary on the "here and now", exactly as Jonson's own 1604 tragedy, *Sejanus,* was interpreted as doing by certain offended contemporaries.

Such perspectives on the contemporaneity and "nowness", of Shakespeare's dramatic canon provide the background for not just the stage traffic but the exponentially increasing screen traffic, of our own similarly challenging, but innovative, times. Rapidly developing technologies in media and stage practices are facilitating similar paradigm shifts in the production and reception of drama as those that occurred in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Shakespeare's plays are major beneficiaries of these new practices, and one of the most significant in transnational consciousness has been live-streamed and captured-live transmission of stage productions. As Susan Bennett has shown, published figures for the creative industries in the UK in 2014 ranked four Shakespeare stage productions, including the NT Live *Coriolanus* and the RSC Live *Richard II*, in the Top-Ten Event Cinema box-office successes (Bennett 42). Lyndsey Turner's 2015 *Hamlet* production, seen by an estimated 800,000 viewers worldwide in initial and repeat screenings (Duffell), further testified to the public appetite for Shakespeare on screen, which has greatly benefited from the box-office pull of stage and screen stars, such as Benedict Cumberbatch (*Hamlet*), Tom Hiddleston (*Coriolanus*), Lily James (*Romeo and Juliet*) and David Tennant (*Richard II*). Outside the UK, the United States and Canada, however, such "live" performances tend to be recorded and transmitted asynchronously for the global market, as Aebischer et al. and Wyver have analysed in their respective seminal studies of theatre broadcast Shakespeare.

In Asian cities subsequent screenings of these NT Live, RSC Live and Globe on Screen performances appear to retain their "virtual liveness",[1] raising pertinent ontological and phenomenological questions about the quality of "liveness" and the interpretation of attendance and presence. Four

case studies will be presented to illustrate my argument that the lack of synchronicity and the physical remoteness of the screenings are less significant issues in Hong Kong than they might be for UK audiences (where experiencing the original event in person is a possibility), whereas the cultural-political resonances of Shakespeare screenings in the past few years are likely to be even more pertinent. All four case studies were experienced by the author as broadcast theatre in Hong Kong cinemas, where audiences are mixed between the roughly 98% ethnically Chinese community and 2% of others, including occidentals. All four were popular with Hong Kong audiences, and rerun as "encore screenings". These productions, more so than screenings of other modern or contemporary Western dramas, tend to speak to Hong Kong audiences, partly on account of the dire sociopolitical future the city appears to be facing in its ever-closer relations with mainland China.

Just as the topicality of Shakespeare screenings in Hong Kong became ever more conspicuous, theatre traffic in general – Shakespeare productions included – slowed to a crawl, and then a standstill. The closure of theatres worldwide from the early months of 2020 due to Covid-19 focused attention, as never before, on Shakespeare in alternative media, formats and styles. In these difficult circumstances the word "transmission" no longer brought the experience of cinema broadcast to mind. In its place, online streaming of recorded content became common practice. So-called home theatre, as a substitute for live performances, incorporated free digital screenings of the 2012 Globe-to-Globe international celebration of Shakespeare in diverse languages and theatrical modes and conventions. Other free-to-view offerings included free streaming of a number of reprised Stratford Festival productions on their Live Viewing Party and Stratford Festival on Film platforms, among which were their acclaimed *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Timon of Athens*, and NT Live productions, including some of their notable Shakespeare "hits", specifically *Twelfth Night*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*, as well as the streaming of cinematically broadcast RSC productions on its online Marquee platform.

These smaller-screen theatrical events have, in their turn, highlighted the dizzying proliferation of Shakespearean transpositions, adaptations, appropriations and remediations available to audiences of all descriptions in this digital age. While the above-mentioned Shakespeare performance events have been a major highlight of the undoubtedly therapeutic virtual-culture fest, the theatrical aura generated by *methexis,* or shared experience, which the theatre, and to a lesser extent the cinema, offers is largely dissipated. Martin Barker's pioneering empirical study, *Live To Your Local Cinema: The Remarkable Rise of Livecasting*, pointed up the sharp divisions regarding virtual audience-ship between those who felt predominantly positive about theatre broadcast and other event cinema and those who remained highly sceptical.

Barker's study, as a broader investigation of a new creative industry in event cinema, was less illuminating regarding the aesthetics of performance transmission. A case in point would be the evident differences between the cinema broadcasts and online, "home theatre", transmissions by the National Theatre and Shakespeare's Globe. The transfer to cinema by NT Live, and perhaps to a lesser extent RSC Live, often loses the performer-audience interactions that may have been palpably theatrical in the original stage performances. By sharp contrast, Shakespeare's Globe tends to retain and showcase such moments in their theatre broadcasting and online transmission. Every aside and knowing wink and every dramatic exchange with, or entry through, the groundlings is a key element of the production aesthetics. We may conjecture how the same respondents, clearly critical of the popcorn-munching cinema experience in Barker's 2012 survey, would view the on-line, quasi-Netflix consumption mode of 2020, one that the pandemic has greatly promoted. For example, the on-screen "chat" function enabling internet viewers to express their comments during performances might well seem "a step too far" for the theatre-going purist. While there is evidence to suggest the online option has proved popular – particularly in anglophone contexts, such as the U.K and Canada, where the weekly offerings represented a substitute for regular theatre-going – it is far less clear whether the alternative to cinema-going has been taken up by second-or-other language audiences in overseas locations.

In Hong Kong the remote viewing experience of Shakespeare plays appears to have revolved predominantly around a small number of dedicated cinemas, and interest was particularly stoked by the quatercentenary celebrations before and after 2016. More recently, judging by the extremely limited uptake of the locally resident Complete Shakespeare interest group[2] who might be expected to show more enthusiasm for the home-viewing option than most, the immersive cinema-going experience is paramount. In my assessment, this is because it is viewed as a cultural event that involves physical presence; in other words, the cinema event is live, immediate and, in a sense, participatory, even if the play performance itself is remote.

## Shakespeare theatre broadcast in Hong Kong

Event theatre in Hong Kong has acquired a distinct cultural presence, even if there remains scope for higher-profile promotion and publicity. The limited marketing for event cinema in the city has suggested short-term complacency regarding the predictable demographic, as opposed to a more ambitious and energetic strategy for fostering audience development. Branding is of great relevance in this extremely brand-conscious, cosmopolitan city, and, in a culture far more oriented towards star vehicles than towards prestigious directors or theatre companies, international actor celebrities have been a major factor in such name recognition. However, no celebrity performer names have had quite as much resonance – whether in stage drama, opera or ballet – as that of Shakespeare. Undoubtedly, the long-standing tradition for Shakespeare amateur performances in Hong Kong, established during its experience under British colonial rule between 1841 and 1997, has ensured greater familiarity with his name and work than in most East Asian cities.

Shakespeare's own cultural iconicity was traded and trafficked – along with the opium and the tea – as emblematic of Britain's claims to cultural superiority. In formerly colonized Asian contexts subjected to this cultural arrogance born of smug imperialism, such as Hong Kong and India, the response has been to appropriate and assimilate Shakespeare's work into a domestic frame of cultural reference, spawning the now well-documented Asian Shakespeare cultural industry and associated scholarly research initiatives, such as the Asian Shakespeare Association (ASA). In the context of contemporary Hong Kong culture, the internationally recognized Tang Shu Wing Theatre Company and their locally popular Cantonese-language productions of *Titus Andronicus* and *Macbeth* – the latter perceived as alluding tangentially to Hong Kong's democratic "umbrella movement" – have also contributed to raising the Shakespearean profile in the city. Tang Shu Wing's production of *Titus Andronicus* for the 2012 Globe-to-Globe Festival was also screened in 2013 in Hong Kong without English subtitles, as in the original staging, and both Shakespeare productions have toured widely.

Despite the target-audience differences for local Shakespeares, depending on whether the language is Cantonese or English, there is, nonetheless, an established rapport with Shakespeare in the city. Local interest in the Bard has been promoted by a strong tradition of touring stage productions in some contexts, preceding digital theatre broadcasts. In Hong Kong, in normal circumstances, each captured-live performance will be screened three or four times within a period of a few months in each of a small number of state-of-the-art multiplex cinemas located in major shopping malls in the commercially busiest districts of Central, Admiralty and Tai Koo Shing on Hong Kong Island and Tsim Sha Tsui on Kowloon-side. Participating cinemas have excellent sound systems and the latest digital projection facilities, and tend to be located in the most cosmopolitan districts of the city. Previously, the vast majority of screenings, whether opera, ballet or stage drama, were wont to attract full or near-full houses. This is partly a reflection of the strictly limited number of screenings available to the public, reinforcing the notion of cultural exclusivity. Concomitant with the optimism that such screenings have commercial potential for niche audiences, comes an ingrained sense of caution, mistrust even, of "high culture" on the part of the city's film distributors and programmers. Even where there is no high-profile promotion, however, there is an ongoing natural process of audience-building, particularly among a younger demographic of cinema-

goers than in the past, those drawn to shopping malls as well as technological "mediatized culture" (Auslander 1).

One manifestation of East Asian audiences' awareness of the remoteness of distance in time and space encapsulated by these "as live" broadcasts is that there is rarely much correspondent reaction discernible in the remote audience to moments of humour or emotion, which are often shared by cinema audiences at theatre broadcasts in the UK or the US. Shakespeare's Early Modern English clearly accentuates this distance, but the reluctance to exhibit affective reaction in Asian contexts such as Hong Kong probably stems from a variety of factors: these range from phenomenological consciousness of geographical remoteness, socioculturally ingrained cinema habits, excessively respectful or monumentalized preconceptions concerning Shakespeare's iconicity to language and other cultural barriers.

To what extent the embrace of anglophone cultural products in Hong Kong, and Shakespeare in particular, can be interpreted as a form of cultural resistance to the social and political hegemony of the new China, particularly in the current climate, as it flexes its political and economic muscle, remains to be seen. Pro-mainland nationalist perspectives on the persistence of UK cultural identity in Hong Kong interpret any manifestations of the latter as a continuation of cultural imperialism and soft-power politics.

Contemporary allegorical readings of Shakespeare relevant to a UK context tend to have less resonance for Hong Kong or Asian audiences, as Adele Lee's empirical 2013 study "Shakespeare in Hong Kong" has shown. By contrast, the evident success of *The Tempest*, co-sponsored by the Hong Kong Arts Festival in their popular Festival Plus programme, suggests that Hong Kong Shakespeare audiences' predilection for celebrity names can also be rivalled by technically spectacular productions of Shakespeare plays. For the purposes of this essay I base my estimation of especially successful screenings of Shakespeare plays in Hong Kong, not on cinema box-office receipts, which are not made available to the researcher. Rather, I consider repeat, or so-called "encore", screenings the most significant index of success.

## Shakespeare and encoded/non-encoded topicality

There is clear sociopolitical resonance in a number of Shakespeare theatre broadcast productions, essentially because Shakespeare's politics remain relatable to our own times. Authoritarian regimes worldwide, as well as governments in more politically "developed" countries, have promoted the emergence of a sociopolitical underclass not only abandoned by socioeconomic development, but marginalized, voiceless and frequently demonized by those with wealth, privilege and power. Increasingly, the picture of a world order dominated by oligarchy and despotism is becoming depressingly familiar. Many of Shakespeare's plays reflect disillusion, if not "rage", with the petty intrigues and jealousies of the political sphere, but also convey a certain scepticism in the charismatic strongman figure, a theme that resonates with internationally relevant obsessions with celebrity and power. This is one factor in their empowering cultural influence worldwide.

Eminent Shakespeare scholar Stephen Greenblatt has observed in his co-authored manifesto on the critical concept of "cultural mobility" that Shakespeare's work exemplifies modern-day aspirations for what he refers to as "a new cosmopolitanism, an unregulated free trade in expression and feeling, an epoch of global respect". But, in the same breath, he warns against the corresponding resistance from vested interests and their "defensive, often violent, policing of the boundaries" (Greenblatt et al. 6, 7). Following public pushback in the United States, the UK and Hong Kong, among others, against such "violent policing" and the marginalization of progressive cultural influence on societies, accentuated by the pandemic and corresponding lockdown measures, the post-Covid-19 revival of cultural mobility has become more urgent than ever.

Contemporary resonance in Shakespeare's work was certainly evident from the political controversy and bitter debate surrounding Oskar Eustis's 2017 production of *Julius Caesar* for Delacorte Theater in New York's Central Park, portraying a Trump-like Caesar. Likewise, in early 2018

Nicholas Hytner's promenade production of the same play at the Bridge Theatre London – broadcast by NT Live and screened in Hong Kong – while making less overt reference to the Trump campaign, skewered the shallowness of political spin and populist rhetoric with its topical semiotic coding implying parallels between Caesar's and Antony's demagoguery and that of Trump. One obvious conclusion that can be drawn from the cynically manipulated furore over Eustis's production of *Julius Caesar,* "marshaling the outrage of Trump supporters" (Shapiro 239),[3] is that, even if the social justice themes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century progressive dramas can be ignored in a contemporary "brave new world" (*The Tempest* 5.1.186) becoming more dominated by right-wing populism and neoliberal values, Shakespeare can't be. Precisely because his work pre-dates the political affiliations of today in terms of a specific ideological and conceptual framework, it is ideally suited to the context of our assumed post-socialist world. No other dramatist can offer a more powerful blueprint for drama as social poetics and moral compass, or as touchstone for social justice, than Shakespeare. In his plays we see the simulation of private and social behaviour as a critical "mirror" held up to humanity in respect of its endeavours and its institutions. What human beings see there rarely flatters to deceive; rather, the dramatic images are likely to invoke a sense of critical self-awareness that is fundamental to civic education and intellectual honesty and responsibility in an open and civilized society.

Unlike the *Julius Caesar* productions cited above, in which reference to contemporary US politics was manifestly encoded by the director and performers,[4] in Hong Kong and East Asia politically relevant subtext for the local context may not be deliberately encoded, but can often be read into certain productions. Thus, resonances and implicatures produced by the communicative interactions of production and audience broaden the frame of reference, and enable topical meanings to be decoded. We should, nevertheless, observe a critical distinction with regard to such contemporary referentiality: the striking nature of a play's topicality is not always necessarily premeditated by the creative directing team of the source stage and screen production and inscribed in its semiotic coding. We should, equally, acknowledge the operation of what might be construed as "felicitous referentiality", whereby Shakespeare's notably flexible frame of reference authenticates alternative readings by an audience in a sociopolitical milieu remote from its context of reception. Such interpretations of putative topicality may be unanticipated by a director or producer of a particular source production.

That said, it is incumbent on the cultural critic to explore any posited specific parallels and extended frames of reference for a remote audience with caution, and eschew over-interpretation or reverse engineering that insists on hypothetical meanings being applied indiscriminately to cinema-broadcast Shakespeare. Equally, as Ania Loomba has argued, we must bear in mind "the contemporary resonance of racial, religious, national or cultural difference" (Loomba 148) that modern-day Shakespeare has come to epitomize. Thus, the "nowness which is Shakespeare's appeal" (Wyver 159) discussed by Gregory Doran in his welcome speech at the 2016 International Shakespeare Association Quatercentenary Congress – later published under the title: "Think When We Talk of Horses … " (Doran) – is applicable to the referential scope of the play's topicality as much as to the immediacy of its mediation via cinema. Salient examples of this in the context of Hong Kong cinema-broadcast Shakespeare from the watershed year of 2014 onward include *Coriolanus* (NT Live, 2014), *Hamlet* (NT Live, 2015), *The Tempest* (RSC Live, 2017) and *Titus Andronicus* (RSC Live, 2017). The content of these screenings was relatable to Hong Kong audiences on account of the acute political uncertainties the city faces in its necessary relationship with an increasingly hard-line People's Republic of China. The selection of these four does not, of course, preclude topicality being discerned in other acclaimed Shakespeare productions popular with Hong Kong audiences, such as Simon Godwin's *Antony and Cleopatra* (NT Live 2018, featuring Ralph Fiennes and Sophie Okonedo) or Jonathan Munby's *King Lear* (NT Live 2017, featuring Ian McKellen), both modern-dress productions. The deconstructionist, or new historicist, ethos of many of these productions can be seen to connect inferentially to the city's history of paternalist and unrepresentative government from the colonial era to the present. Hong Kong people's legitimate

expectations of universal suffrage, guaranteed under the 1984 Joint Agreement between China and the UK and the consequent promulgation of the city's Basic Law under the policy of One Country Two Systems, seem today to be more distant than ever. My four selected screenings will, therefore, be discussed in relation to their germaneness to the Hong Kong situation.

*Coriolanus* was almost certainly written in direct response to the grain riots of May and June 1608 in Shakespeare's native Midlands, following sharp price-hikes for corn, wheat and barley. This insurrection by a desperate peasant underclass was brutally suppressed by authorities, and thus it is reasonable to see the work as conceptually allegorical. Perhaps the play's opening calls to mind for Hong Kong people, many of whose grandparents fled to the then British Crown Colony, the Chinese Communist Party's catastrophic policy of "The Great Leap Forward" that led to widespread famine, despite the state's store-houses full of grain designated for export.[5] The Donmar Warehouse's production of Josie Rourke's *Coriolanus*, directed for cinema by Tim van Someren and transmitted in association with National Theatre Live, was a strong ensemble piece buttressed by the blazing performance of Tom Hiddleston in the role of the eponymous hero/anti-hero. The production invited its vastly larger cinema audiences, as it did the relatively tiny theatre audiences of the Donmar, to consider the political implications of Shakespeare's last great tragedy for our own troubled times. They are considerable, inasmuch as the play represents the ordinary people as a fickle and malleable mob, the politicians as smooth-tongued, self-serving manipulators of the mob and the protagonist as an aloof, ascetic military hero and uncompromising upholder of the divine right of patrician rule. These character types are recognizable in the political world, and are as relevant to contemporary times as when the work was written.

Shakespeare's play reflects disillusion with the petty intrigues and jealousies of the political sphere, but also conveys a certain scepticism in the charismatic leader, a theme that resonates strongly with today's obsessions with celebrity and power. The citizens themselves reflect that to show ingratitude towards their martial hero would be the act of a monster, and their collective ingratitude would therefore "make a monster of the multitude" (*Coriolanus* 2.3.10–11). But Shakespeare's collocation, and alliteration, of these two words in the dialogue of the citizens – from whose mouths Coriolanus expects nothing good – ironically directs our thought towards the common people who make up the mass audience, whether in the past among the groundlings of The Globe, or of today's cinema audiences consisting of what Walter Benjamin and Marxists, generally, would term "the masses". The recurrent trope of the plebeians being represented as a Hydra-headed monster in Coriolanus's diatribes and his injunction to "pluck out / the multitudinous tongue" (*Coriolanus* 3.1.158–59) – in other words, deprive what he sees as a "disobedient" and "ignorant" multitude of their voice in the persons of the tribunes, Sicinius Velutus and Junius Brutus, their political representatives – resonates uncannily with the paternalism of the pro-Beijing ruling elite in Asia's so-called World City. Menenius's facile, if rhetorically effective, argument of the "good" belly distributing the food "through the rivers of your blood" (*Coriolanus* 1.1.133) is ultimately inapposite; the only relevant rivers of blood trope in this context refers to the blood that would be shed by citizens, if Coriolanus's extreme response to the civil unrest at the play's opening were to be approved by Menenius and his cohorts.

The paternalist leadership of Hong Kong would doubtless concur with Coriolanus's accusation that the protesting "plebeians" prevented it from "having the power to do the good it would" (*Coriolanus* 3.1.163) by electing filibustering pan-democrat candidates as their representatives. Like the Roman patricians, they claim to be motivated by patriotism and concern for their "country's good" (3.3.116) but, as in *Coriolanus*, the citizens perceive that their acts are prompted by political expediency. Similarly, these opponents would echo the bitter grievances of the First Citizen in the opening scene of the play that the political elite: "ne'er cared for us yet […] repeal daily any wholesome act established against the rich; and provide more piercing statutes daily to chain up and restrain the poor" (*Coriolanus* 1.1.77–82). Unlike the intransigent hero of Shakespeare's play, however, it won't be pro-establishment figures who are stripped of their position and driven into political exile, but

representatives of the opposition for defending the people's civic rights of freedom of speech and assembly.

Felicitous referentiality in relation to Hong Kong affairs can also be discerned in Benedict Cumberbatch's performance as the protagonist in Lyndsey Turner's 2015 National Theatre production of *Hamlet*, directed for cinema by Robin Lough. To refer back to the title of the present piece, the asynchronous cinema transmission of filmed plays is necessarily determined by physical remoteness and time zone distinctions: thus, the times are literally out of joint or non-aligned between source and remote performance events. In the metaphorical sense of Hamlet's observation early in the play that "the time is out of joint" (*Hamlet* 1.5.189), the second decade of the century has seen increased polarization among Hong Kong people. Hong Kong's "David-versus-Goliath" band of protesters may well concur with Hamlet's subsequent line, "O cursèd spite / That ever I was born to set it right" (*Hamlet* 1.5.189–90); hitherto, the perception of generations of young people preceding the current activist generation was that they were broadly conservative or politically apathetic, but the unaccustomed radicalism of today has come to characterize the local perception of this "post-80s" generation, and even more so, the city's millennials.

The disaffected youth of Hong Kong, as represented by Joshua Wong, Nathan Law, Agnes Chow and others, eschewing Hamlet-like prevarication, attempted to engage with democratic reform by forming a new, but now necessarily disbanded, political party, which they named "Demosisto" – conflating references to democracy and resistance. Protestors' urgent "five demands" replaced the earlier constantly deferred aspirations for an illusory gradual democratization of the city. In the NT Live *Hamlet* Cumberbatch's powerful delivery of the lines to Leo Bill's demurring Horatio: "If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now" (*Hamlet* 5.2.166–67) chimed perfectly with the English graffiti and slogans of resistance in Hong Kong, "revolution of our times" and "now or never". It also placed a completely different and arguably more concrete spin on Doran's advocacy of "nowness" in relation to Shakespeare.

Marcellus's intimation to Horatio that "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (*Hamlet* 1.4.67) likewise chimed with aversion to the policies and perceived corruption of then Chief Executive, Leung Chung Ying. Claudius, like Leung, proves a deeply unpopular political leader, one who is only too aware of the populace's disaffection. This rottenness is graphically evoked by a lava-like flow of debris seeping into the rooms of the royal palace in the final act of the performance. It was highly reminiscent for Hongkongers of the street-movement debris in the latter part of 2014, and, following encore screenings in 2018 and 2019, the widespread anti-government street protests that erupted in various sites in the city. These typically took place between Central and Wanchai on Hong Kong Island and in Mongkok on Kowloon-side, reputedly one of the most densely populated places on the planet.

While Cumberbatch's performance as the titular "hero" of the revenge tragedy and Turner's attempt to encode contemporary relevance elicited mixed critical reviews, the production's visually eloquent emphasis on mutual destruction echoed with certain sentiments in Hong Kong, especially during repeat screenings in 2019. The Cantonese expression *naam chaau,* as Stephen C.K. Chan explained in a 2020 article on Hong Kong's "troubles", equates to the English expression, "if we burn, you burn with us", and reflects "the situated moves of *naam-chaau* as a terminal reciprocity" (Chan 99) in the context of the unequal struggle. Turner's focus on the stage set as the site of disintegration in the play's endgame chimes with what Chan has observed on the streets of Hong Kong: "the feel of a desire for *naam-chaau* is strong and unmistakable on both sides [protestors and police] of the front line of violent actions" (Chan 100). This sentiment finds its aesthetic correlative in Fortinbras's reaction that the dismal scene "cries on havoc" (*Hamlet* 5.2.318) when he witnesses the carnage at the play's end.

Both theatrical and cinematic virtuosity, in addition to topicality, were evident in Doran's high-tech production of *The Tempest*. The screening of this RSC Live production was co-sponsored by the Hong Kong Arts Festival in 2017, and its local popularity suggests that typical Hong Kong audiences' predilection for celebrity names can be matched by technologically spectacular productions.

The "rough magic" (*The Tempest* 5.1.50) of theatre, as an experience based on transience and illusion, is fittingly captured by the production's innovative use of virtual reality motion-capture technology. These scenes are brought vividly to life by the production team's groundbreaking sensor-driven techniques, only for the stage-managed illusions to become "melted into air" (*The Tempest* 4.1.150), reinforcing Prospero's metaphor of life, and indeed theatre, as an "insubstantial pageant" (*The Tempest* 4.1.155).

As Anne Righter has observed, in pointing out the failures and self-delusions of paternalist authority figures in the play, *The Tempest* is also very much about "misgovernment" (Righter 49) and of course the desire for better governance remains an ongoing concern for Hongkongers under the unelected and socially divisive leadership of current Chief Executive, Carrie Lam. The most redolent sociopolitical reference for Hong Kong audiences with regard to this production would have been Gonzalo's (Joseph Mydell) evocation of a political utopia – a commonwealth where there is no sovereignty and genuine equality based on mutual respect and trust. Despite the glaring paradox that Gonzalo himself would need to be King in order to oversee such a paradise, its pacifist message strikes a chord with a community that has no means of self-defence against oppressive external forces; this is not to mention internal forces, particularly an intimidatory police force and a government that subverts its international commitments to the rule of law and tolerance of freedom of expression. At the same time, Prospero's (Simon Russell Beale) colonizing and controlling presence on the island and his domineering treatment of both Ariel and Caliban hark back to a less benign idea of Britishness than that evoked by Queen and Commonwealth, to an earlier age when the British colonizer was the manifest oppressor, and the supposedly "racially inferior" colonized subject, the oppressed.

As in all of the great Shakespeare plays, these underlying paradoxes and conflicts cannot be easily resolved through simple acts of forgiveness and reconciliation. So it is in Hong Kong, living out the consequences in the present of a past and future that the city's people are unable to shape for themselves. Unlike the evocation of a pageant of "cloud-capped towers" and "gorgeous palaces" (*The Tempest* 4.1.152) simply dissolving into air, and thereby enabling Prospero's release from his ethically dubious "rough magic", the city's familiar and very concrete skyline merely serves to mask the unpleasant realities that have occurred at street level. Despite the play's and the production's rich "symbolic imagery" (Ellis-Fermor 269), Gonzalo's political utopia remains as nebulous and insubstantial as it did for Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

In Blanche McIntyre's RSC production of *Titus Andronicus*, originally broadcast from Stratford-upon-Avon in July 2017, the set consists of an imperial facade fronted by what resembles a platform for media announcements and political rallies. This is guarded at times of confrontation by a high metal-mesh fence, capable of being raised or lowered as required, which is targeted by protestors at the opening of McIntyre's interpretation of the play. For the Hong Kong audience, with its own Occupy event fresh in the memory, the protective fence might well have recalled the fence outside the Central Government Offices, the scaling of which marked the start in September 2014 of the civil disobedience of the Occupy Movement. Likewise, the production's nuanced intimation of the discord on the streets of many cities in the middle of the decade was manifest to international audiences in general. The play, and indeed the production, with its touches of grotesque dark humour, rely on an aesthetics of excess that, as in a number of subsequent Jacobean revenge tragedies, allows no space for cathartic feeling on the part of its audience. As one reviewer noted: "if the play holds 'as twere, the mirror up to nature', that nature is both internal and external, and so demands us to question what darkness lies within. How can horror and hilarity be so easily comingled?" (Mills 2017).

McIntyre's presentist production stresses these deep divisions in the dysfunctional sociopolitical fabric of today's world from the outset, highlighting the partisan and violent support for both Saturninus's (Martin Hutson) and Bassianus's (Dharmesh Patel) respective claims as "candidates" for imperial power. She inserts a street-clash prologue between rival factions. In this choreographed sequence demonstrators carry banners proclaiming "Austerity kills", while violence simmers and

the "civil strife" is recorded by some on smartphones. Shortly afterwards, in in the play's powerful opening scene, we witness the pride-fuelled, destructive behaviour of martinet general Titus Andronicus (David Troughton). He shows scant regret for the murder of his own son, Mutius, whose only fault is to cross his father's stubborn will and perverted code of honour by objecting to Titus's rash offer of his only daughter Lavinia's hand in marriage to Saturninus, despite her being voluntarily affianced to Bassianus. Similarly, the bitter social divisions and partisan politics in present-day Hong Kong pit parents against their sons and daughters, and even spouses against each other, in the belligerent blue ribbon (pro-Beijing) versus yellow ribbon (pro-democracy) struggle. Hong Kong's "Lavinias" and "Mutiuses" were not, of course, violated in the way that Shakespeare's characters were, at the time of the initial screening in the city. Nevertheless, by the time of encore screenings in 2019, mounting allegations of rape and torture by the Hong Kong police force, sometimes in ostensible collusion with local triad gangs, were becoming more credible and distressing.

Shakespeare's relentless spotlight on political institutions in his tragedies and histories provides strong justification for the various liberties that the director takes. Titus's naive and wilfully stubborn support of a decaying imperial structure, together with his arrogant assumption of entitlement and his refusal to show mercy to Tamora's son Alarbus, trigger the bloody revenge tragedy in all its vindictive and self-indulgent fury. In his mastery of public rhetoric Titus proves no match for the slick, media-savvy populist Saturninus, seemingly a doppelgänger of the younger Blair, whose speeches are framed more as disingenuous sound-bites than statesmanlike communications. The filmed play's depiction of a society in terminal decline, disintegrating under the weight of its own corruption and excess, is manifestly intended to insinuate parallels with today's sociopolitical malaise. Indeed, it could not fail to be interpreted this way, especially in conflicted Hong Kong.

## Conclusion: future prospects

I have argued that the four Shakespeare performance transmissions to cinema discussed above not only purposively encode indirect topical references to the world of today, but are also apt to be construed as locally referential in a modern, cosmopolitan city such as Hong Kong. Increasingly, theatre directors worldwide are emphasizing the implications of Shakespeare's canon in relation to progressive, social justice-related causes currently being campaigned for by many people, old and young. It isn't difficult to see strong associations between his ever-topical plays and Jürgen Habermas's cultural concept of local and global "communicative action" (Habermas, trans. McCarthy). Habermas argued in his magnum opus, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, that through creative and dialectical use of language, especially in the form of argumentation and intersubjective rationality, social values of morality, legality and democracy can be advanced. Aesthetic communication has a vital function in mediating ideas and facilitating reflective social behaviour in his theoretical construct.

For the theatre-going purist, Shakespeare in cinema may seem "a monster of the multitude" (*Coriolanus* 2.3.11) but, as the dramatic context of this particular scene in *Coriolanus* implies, the more "voices" the better. To take the insincere rhetorical question of tribune Sicinius Velutus out of its context: "What is the city but the people?" (*Coriolanus* 3.1.199). It can be cogently argued that a Hong Kong audience – for whom democracy was a distant aspiration in 2014, and is now a fading dream – will hear this rhetorical question very differently from the way a Western audience, taking its democracy for granted, is likely to do so. In a world in which Shakespeare tends to be promoted as our cosmopolitan contemporary the temptation to disengage and respond to art purely as aesthetic experience or entertainment, is powerful. This is all the more the case when many cities and nations are blighted by self-serving leaders, and rapacious neoliberal ideologues. Shakespeare reminds us that we need to re-engage and participate in communicative action, as autocracy continues to rear its ugly head worldwide.

The NT Live and RSC screenings communicate the cautionary political subtext of plays such as *Titus Andronicus, Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus,* as well as the contemporary parables implicit in

productions such as *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*, to worldwide audiences that staged performances in the pre-theatre-broadcast era could never dream of reaching. It is in the mind's eye and ear of the stage and screen directors, the actor and, ultimately, the audience that meaning is made and mediated. In the Hong Kong sociocultural milieu they resonate powerfully via a poetics of communicative action and dialectical critique, rather than purely through star-quality charisma. It is precisely because Shakespeare lived in an absolutist age and wrote multilayered and intensely political plays that his work retains its cutting edge for today's audiences wherever they are.

The "three-hours" traffic of live Shakespeare performances mediated by cinema has become a relatively standardized and globalized product; it is important, nonetheless, to be conscious of the considerable degree of variation in different contexts of reception and receptivity. As for the prospects in Hong Kong, politically motivated censorship of the arts in the service of the Chinese Communist Party is a distinct likelihood in the coming years. In such circumstances felicitously topical allusions in Shakespeare theatre broadcasts may come to resemble Chinese operas, in which veiled critiques of the status quo could be intuited by the discerning viewer. This prompts the reflection that there is not only an afterlife for Shakespeare's plays through simulcast or captured live transmissions in his own country. There is also "a world elsewhere" (*Coriolanus* 3.3.139) for them, be it elsewhere in Europe, in Africa, Latin America or Asia, as the constant stream of adaptations and appropriations in cities all over the world attests. Unquestionably, the new traffic of the last ten years via theatre broadcast in cinema differs markedly from the old imperialist model, and fosters a greater spirit of reciprocity and cultural exchange than was evident in the past.

## Notes

1. I use this term to designate remote, asynchronous screenings in which a sense of immediate participation in the live performance is difficult to substantiate, especially given the popularity of "encore" screenings in a place like Hong Kong.
2. This is a Shakespeare interest group founded in Hong Kong in August 2018 with involvement from theatre director Tang Shu Wing and the author of this article and dedicated to reading and discussing all of Shakespeare's plays, one by one on a monthly basis.
3. Shapiro's in-depth account provides a much clearer and more detailed picture of the events surrounding the production than most others, and benefits from a measured retrospective analysis.
4. As Shapiro's chapter makes clear, the assassination scene is by no means celebratory in the Eustis production, and neither was it in Hytner's Bridge Theater production. This was the spurious claim of the far-right, pro-Trump media in their unsuccessful attempts to close down the Delacorte Theatre production.
5. For an in-depth study of this devastating man-made famine, see Frank Dikötter.

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