

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Yong, Li Lan, dir. Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive
(A | S | I | A)

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[See table of contents](#)

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profiling.”¹ These concepts clearly resonate with the goals and achievements of the MIT Global Shakespeares Video and Performance Archive, as they

critique the limitations of cartographic imagination, and connect the performance site and locality to myth and to spaces of knowledge production: (1) the site of performance and the myth of global Shakespeare; (2) diaspora and racial tensions; (3) art in postnational space; (4) the ethics of quoting Shakespeare and world cultures; and (5) the production and dissemination of knowledge through archives.²

In the introduction of this review, I have argued that the MIT Global Shakespeares Video and Performance Archive is both a product and an instrument of cross-pollination between performance studies and the study of Shakespeare. As these few lines by Joubin in particular, and other works inspired and facilitated by this Archive in general, demonstrate, the study of global Shakespeares can stimulate and inform radical performance studies today in the same way in which performance studies stimulated and informed the study of Shakespeare a couple of decades ago.

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Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive (A|S|I|A).

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a-s-i-a-web.org.

Launched in 2008 by scholars from Singapore, Japan, the USA, China, and South Korea, and available at a-s-i-a-web.org, the Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive (or A|S|I|A) is a quite wonderful creative and critical resource. Although helmed by Yong Li Lan (National University of Singapore)

1. Alexa Alice Joubin, “Global Shakespeare Criticism beyond the Nation State,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Performance*, ed. James C. Bulman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 425.

2. Joubin, 425.

as archive development and general editor, A|S|I|A is very much a collaborative project involving critics, directors, producers, artists, and translators. An enormous archive of videos of productions, scripts, and data (encompassing programs, flyers, images, reviews, and other materials), A|S|I|A celebrates the wealth of Shakespeare productions in the main languages and cultures of East Asian and Southeast Asian theatres. It constitutes a mammoth undertaking—I counted the participation of over one hundred scholars, translators, editors, designers, and programmers across some eleven countries, with a total of sixty-one productions being featured. A|S|I|A is also organized in such a way as to be a continually enriching and rewarding experience.

In any such undertaking, issues of translation come to the fore. A|S|I|A makes its production examples available in English, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. Depending on the degree of adaptation, the translations provided (in subtitles) are the production script, a direct translation of that script into English (or other Asian languages), and a Shakespeare-equivalent script (that is, an edited version of the “original” Shakespearean play). A particularly felicitous feature is the option to toggle in videos between different languages. There are also options for audio transcription and accessing (where available) the subtitled script a production may have deployed on tour. The effect is that A|S|I|A opens out possibilities for translations that move in several directions at one and the same time. Various texts mingle and co-mingle. More broadly, in the ways in which it is conceived and imagined, A|S|I|A reverses a colonial/imperial dynamic. Shakespeare’s name comes second in the archive title, while the emphasis in the resource overall is on multilingualism (rather than English) and interculturalism. Even language, it could be said, is played down. The focus of attention is certainly not Shakespeare’s own language, which appears here only as an echo or sub-stratum of interest. Crucially, then, A|S|I|A is of a piece with larger decolonizing or demythologizing initiatives, the performance dialogue taking precedence over the Shakespearean text.

The productions themselves appear as ranked images under a “Productions” tab. Each image offers three clickable components: the production itself (a camera icon), a further information option (a file icon which guides the user to additional areas—production, art/forms, points of reference, and reception), and “More details” (mainly programs and images). Once into the further information area, relevant data appear in delightfully floating and revolving bubbles, an arresting and engaging way of demonstrating visual connections. The provision

of information is exceptionally generous. For example, each production is characterized in terms of its degree of adaptation, of which there are three, with sub-categories of plot, character, and text pointing to different levels of adaptive interaction. This has the virtue of allowing the user to track changes, modifications, and links with other content. In addition, there is information about press responses and artists' self-evaluations, which then leads to related materials. If this isn't enough, when watching the actual productions, further support is provided in the form of the "Notepad" provision of glosses on culture-specific vocabularies and expressions.

Separately, a tab marked "Pie Charts" guides the user to other cross-referencing and comparative facilities. The pie charts reveal proportions of activity. Hence, a user can search under costume design, lighting design, music/sound design, and objects, finding proportions for each within a particular production choice. The result is again to enable us to construct for ourselves inter-Asian histories. Of course, several productions featured here make a virtue of their inter-Asian identities; however, a winning aspect of the A|S|I|A platform is that users can construct and hypothesize interplay for themselves, mixing and matching at the level of approach, style, and concept. Whichever options the user selects, there is abundant opportunity for tracking how a Shakespearean play has been mobilized between cultures and languages.

In this sense, A|S|I|A offers a highly interactive experience. To give just one example, the "Notepad" in the right margin of the production video can be used for annotation: users participate as a private member or member of a group. There is also a toolbox/workspace and a forum for the exchange of ideas. Of inestimable value for pedagogy, as well as enabling individual involvement, A|S|I|A showcases interactivity as principle and practice.

What of the examples? As one might expect, some of the better-known examples feature fully. They include *Pericles* (dir. Yang Jung-Ung), by the Yohanan Theatre Company, Korea, staged between 2015 and 2016; *Lear* (dir. Ong Ken Sen), a collaboration between six Asian countries originally staged in 1997 by the Japan Foundation; and *Lear is Here* (dir. Wu Hsing-Kuo), performed in Mandarin by the Contemporary Legend Theatre from 2001 onwards. As with all the productions featured, contextual support is of a very high order, with the subtitles in English to these productions setting the scene, providing further information and furnishing different routes into the various languages.

I close with some reflections on the ways in which one production—*Romeo and Juliet* (dir. Oh Tae-Suk), staged from 2005 onwards by the Korean Mokwha Repertory—is illuminated and comes to life via the archival interface. It is immediately apparent that this was a touring production. The “More details” option takes us to some exciting production stills and to the program for the Barbican performance in London, and this itself is ample, including an essay by John Russell Brown on Brecht and the political contexts of Shakespeare in Korea, as well as reflections by the director on the Korean folk form, *pansori*, the setting of the production in the Joseon dynasty, and his career to date. Meanwhile, the further information option steers us to a YouTube interview with the director and further essays with translation options. No less stimulating are the newspaper reviews from *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, as well as blogs and academic writing on the production from *Shakespeare Review*. Scrolling along the other tabs leads us to the Pie Chart, and here one can find out more about the Korean vernacular used for this *Romeo and Juliet*, the role of colour, the design (roof frames of older Korean houses), and the significance of the huge sheet, a recurrent prop/object. Finally, there is a cornucopia of information about culture-specific elements such as the mask dance, martial arts, and shamanistic rituals, all of which are keyed to particular production moments. The research for an integrated and sophisticated individual study of this production is readily available; all the user has to do is to bring the multiple elements together.

A|S|I|A is in fact a study in archives, a model of how to theorize the archive, and a working demonstration of what can be achieved in thinking through, and collaborating on, the complexions of Asian Shakespeares. It also of course yields multiple interpretive possibilities and hours of viewing satisfaction and pleasure. Does this resource substitute for the on-site experience of being in a theatre? Absolutely. Does it add to that “live” experience? For this reviewer, yes. Are the meanings changed? In many productive ways. Does the platform have an educational as well as a scholarly component? It certainly does, because A|S|I|A is infinitely transferrable to a classroom situation in the same moment as it constitutes a hugely important critical contribution.

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