From Messina to Delhi: Much Ado about Staging Global Shakespeares in Olympic Times

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ABSTRACT

The present article discusses one of the contributions of the Royal Shakespeare Company to the World Shakespeare Festival, a celebration of the Bard as the world's playwright that took place in the UK in 2012 as part of the so-called Cultural Olympiad. Iqbal Khan directed for the RSC an all-Indian production of the comedy *Much Ado about Nothing* that transposed the actions from early modern Messina to contemporary Delhi and presented its story of love, merry war of wits and patriarchal domination in a colourful setting that recreated a world of tradition and modernity. Received with mixed reviews that in general applauded the vibrant relocation while criticising some directorial choices, this 2012 *Much Ado about Nothing* in modern-day Delhi raises a number of questions about cultural ownership and Shakespeare's international performance – issues that are particularly relevant if we see the play in relation to other productions of the World Shakespeare Festival in this Olympic year but also in the context of the increasing internationalization of Shakespeare's cultural capital in contemporary times.

KEYWORDS: Indian Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing*, performance studies, Royal Shakespeare Company, worldwide Shakespeare.

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During the 2012 Summer Olympics London became the focus of international sport audiences, the prized location for international visitors and the object of the global gaze through the mass media. A large number of cultural activities took place in the UK in the so-called London 2012 Cultural Olympiad that had started in 2008, with programmes and projects inspired by the London Olympics. The culmination of the Cultural Olympiad was the London 2012 Festival which involved more than 25,000 national and international artists in events throughout the country. An important part of it was the World Shakespeare Festival produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company in collaboration with leading UK and international arts organisations and described by its organisers as a celebration of Shakespeare as the world's playwright (Mackenzie 2012). The present article focuses on one of the contributions of the Royal Shakespeare Company to the World Shakespeare Festival, an all-Indian production of the comedy *Much Ado about Nothing* that transposes the actions from early modern Messina to contemporary Delhi and presents its story of love, merry war of wits and patriarchal domination in a colourful setting that can bring to mind Bollywood cinema. Directed by Pakistani-British director Iqbal Khan for the Royal Shakespeare Company and received with mixed reviews that in general applauded the vibrant relocation while criticising some directorial choices, this 2012 *Much Ado about Nothing* in modern-day Delhi raises a number of questions about cultural ownership and Shakespeare's international performance – issues that are particularly relevant if we see the play in relation to other productions of the World Shakespeare Festival in this Olympic year but also in the context of the increasing internationalization of Shakespeare's cultural capital in contemporary times.

The World Shakespeare Festival ran between April and November 2012. The Royal Shakespeare Company's assessment of the Festival on its website right after its closing stated that it had reached 1.5 million people and was therefore "the biggest celebration of Shakespeare ever staged" ("RSC: Updates and News").[1] A very

[1] The website summarizes the events of the World Shakespeare Festival in the following terms: "More than 10,000 professional and amateur artists and theatre makers from around the world have taken part in 69 full-scale productions, 7 exhibitions, 6 film screenings, 5 scratch performances, more than 260 amateur shows in Open Stages, new digital commissions on *myShakespeare* <url: my shakespeare.worldshakespearefestival.org.uk>, 15 commissioned short films on *The*

visible part of the festival in London was *Globe to Globe*, a major international programme produced by Shakespeare's Globe which involved the performance of all of Shakespeare's plays by international companies in different languages in the course of six weeks at the Globe Theatre – as the promotional material stated, an unprecedented programme of multilingual Shakespeare productions that offered 37 plays in 37 languages. Unlike the *Globe to Globe* plays, the RSC productions for the World Shakespeare Festival were in English (with the exception of *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad*, in Arabic, and a circus approach to the histories, *Two Roses for Richard III*, in Portuguese). Iqbal Khan's RSC *Much Ado about Nothing* was developed with an all British cast (crucially, an all British-Asian cast), was fully in English (with minor additions in Indian languages) and showed the utmost respect for the plot and language of Shakespeare's text. Originally staged in the summer of 2012 at the Courtyard Theatre in Stratford, it transferred to the London West End as part of RSC London season in mid-September for five more weeks.

This Indian *Much Ado* must be seen in relation to other Shakespeare plays performed by the RSC in the World Shakespeare Festival, such as *Twelfth Night*, *The Tempest* and *The Comedy of Errors* (the first two directed by David Farr and the third by Amir Nizar Zuabi, artistic director of the National Theatre of Palestine). The three plays were performed by the same cast and were conceived by David Farr as the shipwreck trilogy, in which "people arrive in places unexpectedly and face a huge challenge and culture shock" ("RSC 'What country'"). He chose them as "the right plays for the year of the London Olympics" since they explore "the recurrent obsessions of Shakespeare with migration, exile and the discovery of yourself through others" ("RSC 'What country'"). In fact, as was openly stated by the company itself, "[a]ll productions in the RSC repertoire during the Festival explore other cultures through the lens of Shakespeare's plays" ("RSC Much Ado"). This is the first context for the analysis of the RSC 2012 all-Indian *Much Ado about Nothing*: in an Olympic year when the World Shakespeare Festival is bringing to the UK local readings of his plays by foreign companies in different

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Space <url: <thespace.org/items/s00009ja> (alongside Globe to Globe's 36 filmed performances), 2 digital broadcasts, an online education collaboration with the BBC, and an international education conference" ("RSC: Updates and News").

languages, the iconic British theatre company is ready to present Shakespeare through a culture that is foreign, and yet not quite foreign, and to transport the play to a land that is distant, and yet close, because it may be the imaginary homeland of many of the 4% of British population who have family origins in the Indian subcontinent.

Iqbal Khan's *Much Ado* in Delhi is not the first RSC production of this comedy to be set in India, but the company's use of the Indian milieu and characters is very different from John Barton's 1976 version, in which the director transferred the action to a garrison town in the Raj at the end of the nineteenth century, with the high-ranking characters all English and the watch members all Indian (at the time, white actors in blackface). One of the keys to the success of Barton's version was apparently "the hilarious antics of the Watch, played as an Indian *Dad's Army*, complete with funny 'babu' accents and Indian body-language ill adapted to the conventions of the British Army" (Gay 1994:161), a concept that nevertheless some members of the audience found "offensive – racist and patronising" (Gay 1994:161).[2] John Barton's approach to the social gulf in Messina society in such blatant racial terms would cause general discomfort in contemporary audiences and undermine the overall value of the production.

The second context for the all-Indian RSC production of *Much Ado about Nothing* in 2012 is very succinctly presented in the official website of the *Globe to Globe* programme, a map of the world with hyperlinks on all five continents for all the international productions that were presented at the Globe. This cartography of the world through Shakespeare conveys in visual shorthand the sense that the work of the Bard is, like the Olympic Games, a worldwide affair: not only was he a truly global author that in his own time recreated the entire world in the playhouse (a key idea in the 2012 British Museum exhibition, "William Shakespeare: Staging the World"), but his work is the key gift of Britain to world culture which can still in its many afterlives project Britain onto the world and bring the world to

[2] Critic Penny Gay herself had mixed feelings about this choice for the watch: although she perceived the racism in the conception, she found that she was "smiling at the comic performance of John Woodvine's Dogberry, which certainly put life into those old jokes which critics almost unceasingly complain are never funny enough" (Gay 1994:161-162).

Britain. The World Shakespeare Festival reflects a sort of paradox in contemporary Shakespearean performance and scholarship: on the one hand, as stated in the leaflet for the British Museum exhibition, "William Shakespeare is Britain's greatest cultural contribution to the world" ("Shakespeare: Staging the World") – and the strong presence of his plays in the official cultural programme of the year is the Olympic endorsement of that; on the other hand, this great cultural icon appears to belong to Britain in increasingly tenuous ways, due to the steady development in the last decade of what initially, in Dennis Kennedy's pioneer volume of 1993 were called "foreign" Shakespeares and alternatively, and ever more so, "world-wide," "local" or "global" Shakespeares.[3] As Kennedy and Yong indicate in their introduction to a recent volume on Shakespearean performance in Asia,

> Much has happened on planet Shakespeare since 1990. For our purposes the most important has been a notable increase in Shakespeare performance in surroundings alien to the traditions of the main English-speaking nations, some of which has been exported to the West, prompting corresponding expansion in the international critical attention those productions have received in the popular press and in the academy. (Kennedy and Yong 2010:1)

Recent years have indeed witnessed a growing interest in Shakespearean productions and afterlives outside Britain and the English-speaking world, particularly in Asia, with the proliferation of studies of non-English Shakespeares in specific areas of the world, such as Murray J. Levith's *Shakespeare in China* (2004), Poonam Trivedi and Dennis Bartholomeusz's *India's Shakespeare: Translation, Interpretation, and Performance* (2005), Alexander C. Y. Huang's *Chinese Shakespeare: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange* (2009), Dennis Kennedy and Yong Li Lan's *Shakespeare in Asia: Contemporary Performance* (2010) and Poonam Trivedi and Minami Ryuta's *Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia* (2010). Volumes such as these attest to the "explosion of critical interest in the way that Shakespeare has been

[3] "World-wide" is used by Kennedy himself in his contribution to the 2001 *Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare* and Sonia Massai in *World-Wide Shakespeares: Local Appropriations in Film and Performance* (2005); "local" is used in volumes such as Martin Orkin's *Local Shakespeares: Proximations and Power* (2005); "global" is used for instance in Craig Dionne and Parmita Kapadia's *Native Shakespeares: Indigenous Appropriations on a Global Stage* (2008).

made to accommodate local cultures across the globe" (Dionne and Kapadia 2008:5), a tendency that is occasionally questioned by a number of scholars, both from the great centres of learning of the West and from non-Western locations. Some like Ania Loomba show an awareness of the market forces at work in the internationalization of the cultural capital of Shakespeare, as when she states in reference to some of these worldwide performances that "in our globalized world, a 'hybrid' Shakespeare – one who allows a fusion, a truly postmodern montage, of once-colonized and once-colonizing cultures, the Metropole and the Global South, center and periphery – has become a highly marketable commodity on stages in different locales" (Loomba 2008:209).[4] A more poignant case at hand is the two-decade long critical take of Rustom Bharucha on the appropriation of Eastern performance elements by major directors in the West (one focus of his 1993 volume *Theatre and the World*) and his discomfort with some of the interpretations of "foreign" Shakespeares by Western scholars – and even more so, his overall questioning of the whole enterprise in the occasional uncharitable reading of it as stemming from strictly pragmatic concerns: "[i]s the preoccupation with Shakespeare in other cultures not simply a means of extending the information retrieval on an arguably burned-out Bard?" (Bharucha 2004:4).

On the whole, however, congratulatory readings of this new expansion of Shakespeare throughout the world are predominant, with some scholars even seeing in these new productions reasons to celebrate a greater balance between the first world and the emerging world – at least in terms of the cultural capital represented by Shakespearean performance. As Poonam Trivedi and Minami Ryuta state in their introduction to *Re-playing Shakesperare in Asia*,

> [t]he recognition, circulation, and approbation of Asian versions of Shakespeare in the last few decades mark a shift in intellectual property relations. A side benefit of globalization has been the expansion of the areas of reckoning: "other Shakespeares" can now cohabit the same playing space as the metropolitan. (Trivedi and Ryuta 2010:2)

[4] Even the highly celebratory Kennedy and Yong recognize that non-Western Shakespearean productions play "on a double marketability for their international audiences: the name brand of Shakespeare and the performance of the exotic" (2010:1-2).

This attention to Shakespeare's work in its non-English incarnations can be connected to a more general tendency in Renaissance Studies in recent years to conceive early modern English culture in its relation to the rest of the world. As Joytsna Singh indicates in *The Companion to the Global Renaissance* (2009), "recent globally oriented scholarship of the past decade has led the way in creating a more expansive, shifting Renaissance world-picture" (Singh 2009:5), and scholarship in recent years has traced the origins of present-day globalization to the cross-cultural interactions of Renaissance England with Europe and with the Americas, Africa and the East as it explores "the impact of global economic, cultural, religious and political developments on English society and culture during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (Singh 2009:5).[5]

In keeping thus with the international spirit of an Olympic year and with the predominant contemporary perception that Shakespeare is indeed a global author, in 2012 the World Shakespeare Festival gathered as we have seen many productions of what only a few years ago used to be called foreign Shakespeares but are increasingly designated with terms such as local, worldwide or global. The Shakespearean festival of 2012 is not only appropriate for an Olympic year but the result of the awareness that innovative Shakespearean performances may indeed come as much from outside Britain as from within – and that bringing them onto the British stages, particularly the Southbank Globe, is a way of grounding them in the Bard's soil: performing them in the recreated Renaissance playhouse re-routes (and re-roots) them to their place of origin. Iqbal Khan's Indian *Much Ado* with an all British(-Asian) cast is a different take on worldwide Shakespeares in this Olympic year. Like the African RSC production of *Julius Caesar* – also with an all (black) British cast – that it followed upon at Stratford, this Indian

[5] Another strand in this weaving of a global Renaissance concept comes from the work of scholars that are opening up the very idea of Renaissance England even in terms of population, with significant efforts to include in the image of the country the erased presence of Africans at the time by so-called empirical race studies – represented for instance by Imtiaz Habib's *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500-1677* (2008), a book that "boldly reconfigures the archive of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English history by uncovering an actual black population, previously considered tiny and insignificant" (Singh and Shahani 2010:136), as it finds "hidden in the vast archives of parish churches within London and without, all through the Tudor and Stuart reigns […] voluminous cryptic citations of 'nigro', 'neger', 'neyger', 'blackamoor', 'moor', 'barbaree'" (Habib 2008:2).

version of *Much Ado* is part of an attempt to reclaim the Bard for sections of Britain's population that may feel excluded from Shakespearean performance, a response to the sense that the cultural capital of Shakespeare, so very much circulating on the worldwide stages of other languages and cultures, belongs to *all* British people, including those whose family roots take them to other continents. The RSC *Much Ado* shows how in their conceptions of Shakespeare's plays directors try "to respond to the changing social climate" (Wynne-Davies 2001:5), the production in this case attempting both to reflect and to change social perceptions of Shakespearean performance. For most of the actors, including protagonist Meera Syal, this play was their debut season with the RSC and the director of the company Michael Boyd openly expressed his wish to appeal to a more varied theatre audience in Stratford: "We are a very white organisation […]. Only 2% of our audience at Stratford is Asian, black or from an ethnic minority […]. Some Asian families come [to Stratford] at weekends to mess about in boats on the river here but they do not come to the theatre. We need to change that" (Boyd in Brooks 2012:15).

This attempt to make Shakespeare relevant to Asian communities in Britain is in line with Michael Boyd's decade-long effort to open up the Royal Shakespeare Company to international and multicultural performance – the 2012 World Shakespeare Festival was the last major event he organised as its artistic director. Boyd had been responsible for the 2006 year-long Complete Works of Shakespeare Festival which involved thirty companies, nineteen of which were international. One of the great successes of the festival was a pan-Indian version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by Tim Supple that gathered actors from across the Indian subcontinent and presented the play in English and seven Indian languages. Before stepping down from the RSC Michael Boyd left in place for the 2013 spring season Tanika Gupta's *The Empress*, a play about Queen Victoria's relationship with one of her Indian servants and the Indian presence in England at the time. Iqbal Khan's *Much Ado about Nothing* is one more example of Michael Boyd's role in bringing together British and Indian culture.

Iqbal Khan's all-Indian production was conceived and promoted around the figure of well-known British comedienne, scriptwriter and novelist Meera Syal as Beatrice, the female

protagonist of the secondary plot of the play, which is indeed as powerful, or more so, than the story of Claudio and Hero, its nominal main plot – most critics "literally or figuratively put the term in quotation marks and are quick to point out that Beatrice and Benedick overshadow this 'plot', however 'main' it is" (Neely 1985:56). For generations audiences have attended performances of the play to witness the merry verbal wars between these two characters, who can be seen in their witty verbal exchanges as forerunners of the verbal fencing of Restoration comedy and the sparkling dialogues of 1930s Hollywood screwball comedy – with Benedick and Beatrice's battle of the wits in this particular production as "reminiscent of the *nok-jhok* or playful banter that is the stuff of Bollywood romance" (Shahani 2012). Some reviewers perceived connections of Khan's play with the productions of the massively popular Indian film industry, and references to Bollywood were a way to describe the visual and aural impact of the vibrant setting and the group dance numbers – which in fact the director, in a restrained use of the Bollywood spirit, introduced strictly where the original play calls for music and dance, at the masquerade in 2.1 and in the final celebration in 5.4. The *Daily Mail* description of the play as a "Bollywood extravaganza" (also used in some RSC publicity posters) went too far in the analogy, even though perceptions of certain parallelisms with Indian films were inevitable among reviewers, from positive assessments of Bollywood vibes to evaluations of the play as "vigourously populist, […] frenetic and overspiced" (Billington 2012).

Meera Syal appears on the programme cover and publicity posters presiding Titania-like on a colourful huge globe against a night background with a cascading net of lights: radiant yet mischievous, her demeanour as she sits on a saffron, pink and white globe (a huge incarnation of the globe-like logo of the World Shakespeare Festival) grants her a relaxed authority that puts her at the centre of the play. Casting Meera Syal as Beatrice to head the all British-Asian cast and making her the focus of some of the publicity for the play is a strategic move on the part of the RSC to bring minority communities closer to Shakespeare with a performance that links the Bard and the Indian subcontinent. British audiences may not be aware of the complex history of Shakespearean performance in India or of the role of Shakespeare's texts in implementing the

colonial system of education.[6] Most of them will be familiar, however, with Meera Syal as a comic actress, the protagonist of BBC2 sitcoms *Good Gracious Me* and *The Kumars at No 42* – some may even know that she is a scriptwriter and the author of two novels about British-Asian experience, *Anita and Me* (1996) and *Life isn't all Ha Ha Hi Hi* (1999). Director Iqbal Khan was concerned that among some British minorities "Shakespeare still represents a colonial power" (Khan in Brooks 2012:15) and casting a popular star like Syal was his first step towards reclaiming ownership of the Bard for British-Asian audiences.

Meera Syal argues for the transposition of *Much Ado about Nothing* to India in the following terms:

> [T]he fact that our production sets it in India makes so much sense. At the centre of the play is something that is almost an honour killing. Couple that with the fact that the play shows two contrasting kinds of marriages, one that is a love marriage and one that is much closer to an arranged marriage, and you don't have to reach to make it relevant. ("Moments of Revelation")[7]

In fact, the Royal Shakespeare Company chose to transpose the play to present-day Delhi because it appeared as a location in which to find "the contemporary world existing alongside traditional values" ("RSC Much Ado"). Distancing the location and/or the time of the play from that of the audience has been the rule of twentieth and twenty-first century productions of the play, from John Gielgud's celebrated Stratford performances of the 1940s and 1950s, which retained a Renaissance atmosphere, to the 2011 West End success which placed it in Gibraltar in the eighties after the Falklands War or the Globe production of the same year which blended early Modern Messina and Morocco, from the psychedelic reds and oranges in an empty box of the Tudor production directed by Trevor Nunn for the RSC in 1968 to the early Victorian conservatory, the Sicily of

[6] For a succinct history of Shakespearean reception in India see Trivedi (2011).

[7] This particular play has special resonance for her: "Rehearsing that wedding scene was shocking, and it contained echoes of other things that I'm involved with. I'm the patron of Newham Asian Women's Project and we fund refugees for women escaping violent marriages. These are real" ("Moments of Revelation").

Mussolini, or the Cuba of 1953 in the RSC versions by Ronald Eyre in 1971, Gregory Doran in 2002 and Marianne Elliott in 2006.[8]

"Comparisons are odorous" says the watch leader Dogberry in 3.5.15,[9] but Khan's play was indeed staged at a time when a cluster of highly visible productions of *Much Ado* appeared on the London stages: the 2012 RSC *Much Ado* trailed behind Jousie Rourke's West End production of 2011 (with *Doctor Who* David Tennant as Benedick) and Jeremy Herrin's version at the Globe of the same year, as well as the French *Globe to Globe* version of 2012. (It also happened to be onstage right at the time of the premiere at the Toronto Film Festival in September 2012 of the extremely well received and then soon to be released black-and-white modern-dress adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing* by popular film director Joss Whedon.) While these theatrical productions moved the actions to the close or distant past, Khan's version places it in the present and it attempts to recreate modern-day India as a land of contradictions in which the forces of modernity are at odds with long-entrenched patriarchal perceptions about women. This is an idea that is repeated in interviews with the director, actors, and other members of the ensemble, such as set designer Tom Piper, who describes the production as "akin to something like *Monsoon Wedding*, which will celebrate both traditional culture and assess the impact of modernity" (McLaughin 2012). Or Khan himself, who insists that when he thought "about the themes of the play – chastity and pure blood lines, the rituals of courtship, the arrangements of marriage" he realised that "all of those things are incredibly vital in India" (Iqbal 2012).

Unlike the *Globe to Globe* productions, Iqbal Khan's *Much Ado* is fully performed in English, with the exception of songs and a few interjections among the servants and occasionally when the masters address them. The ruling principle for Khan has been his utmost respect for Shakespeare's text, which is only altered minimally to adapt certain details to the Indian setting and keep up with the cultural transposition from early modern Messina to contemporary

[8] For the performance history of *Much Ado*, see Gay (1994), Cox (1997) and Bate and Rasmussen (2009). It can be argued that in the play Messina is in fact "any romantic place lived in by rich and relatively important people" (Everett 2001:60).

[9] All subsequent references to *Much Ado about Nothing* are to Zitner's edition (1994).

Delhi. Thus, the friar who develops the scheme of Hero's death in the play becomes a *pandit* who celebrates the wedding in Leonato's house, since in India "often the religious minister comes to the house and will marry the couple at home" ("RSC *Much Ado*"); the references to church are replaced by "temple;" and where Italy is mentioned usually India is inserted (there is some mixing in this, with Benedick described as "the properest man in India" instead of "in Italy" in 5.1.169 but Dogberry referring to himself as "pretty a piece of flesh as any is in Messina" in 4.2.81-82). Correspondingly, the contemporary Delhi setting means that traditional Indian clothes are mixed with contemporary Western-style jeans and shirts. Beatrice significantly first appears on stage reading from a tablet in a power suit and high heels that may suggest a life outside the domestic sphere as a successful business woman. This relocation of the actions to modern-day Delhi, with its mingling of modernity and traditional values, allows for interesting explorations of certain areas of the play while it can be problematic in others.

The transposition of this particular Shakespearean comedy to contemporary Indian society appears to make sense on a number of levels: reviews frequently highlight the suitability of the Indian setting as "a land of tradition and transition, vigour and swagger and intense awareness of rank" (Purves 2012:64) and stress the appropriateness of "communality and hierarchical structuring of life in India that map effectively on to similar structuring in Elizabethan England" (Brennan 2012). It may be excessive to claim, as Jyotsna Singh does, that in this performance "early modern Messina is transposed to contemporary Delhi in a way that richly illuminates and transforms the idioms of both worlds" (Singh 2012), but it is true that certain aspects of the plot may fit in together more easily if the actions are moved to India. However, this transposition of setting and time also transfers to contemporary Indian society the problematic aspects of the play as a romantic comedy, the "tensions, contrarieties and dissonances" (Cox 1997:67) of the Claudio-Hero plot and the discomfort that contemporary audiences may feel at the fissures of the final festivities, which celebrate multiple weddings the day after an innocent bride has been humiliated at the altar with false accusations of unfaithfulness. All in all, from a contemporary point of view the patriarchal power lines that propel the actions in the play are hard to accept: they encroach upon society's interactions

so much that a female member of the community has to pretend to die so that she can be reborn chaste and pure.

Claudio's extreme inexperience in matters of love is sometimes emphasized by critics as the basis of his cruel naivety as "a young man uncertain of his judgement of women" (Ornstein 1986:123) and directors frequently choose to downplay his callous behaviour by making him appear very young and gullible, and his repentance after the revelation of the truth powerfully remorseful. That was Kenneth Branagh's decision in his 1993 film version of the play, for instance, through the use of close-ups of Claudio's suffering face and an extended sequence for the mourning scene in 5.3., and also Jousie Rourke's strategy in her 2011 West End play, by showing his attempted suicide at Hero's tomb. Some productions do visualize the supposed treason of Hero to reinforce for the audience the evidence presented to Claudio and Don Pedro (also the case in Branagh's and Rourke's productions). Khan's Claudio does not appear particularly naïve or young, nor is he manipulated into "seeing" Hero's unfaithfulness – this incident is, as in Shakespeare's original text, simply narrated by Borachio to Conrad the night they are caught by the motley city watch. Khan's effort to soften his cruelty is only channeled through the visually powerful mourning scene in 5.3.

The problem of *Much Ado* as a comedy is that the festive spirit is tainted by the re-assimilation of characters into a restored happy society that may be perceived to be deficient. The stage history of the play shows that it has "moved around geographically partly at least as a response to […] the need to find a cultural ambience which might explain if not excuse Claudio's callous treatment of Hero and Leonato's response to her slander" (Bate and Rasmussen 2009:121). And thus one major success of this production, the powerfully enacted bashing-scene in which Hero is rejected, is a great asset that can become a problematic area, to the extent that Khan's production may appear to be recasting without apparent criticism or ironic distance the ugly side of the still strongly patriarchal society of India. When asked how this situation sits with the country's attempts to rebrand itself as an aspiring superpower, the director's response was that "Delhi is about as Elizabethan a place as you could find in the modern-day world" (Iqbal 2012). The emphasis on the final celebration of 5.4, a Bollywood-like dance sequence with no dark strains to it, carries with it the danger of an implied acquiescence

with the previous situation – a lack of criticism that is easier to accept in productions that present the patriarchal structures as part of a past time in a distant place.[10]

The set design by Tom Piper was overall one of the main successes of the production, and its one significant change in the mourning scene in 5.3 its main attempt to temper Claudio's cruel behaviour by powerfully showing his suffering and his repentance. Tom Piper recreated in his set the domestic environment of a northern Indian haveli and courtyard, with a running upper gallery and several doors for entrances and exits like the early modern stage, a decorated rail staircase on the left that led to the gallery and a huge tree with tangled wires and ropes upstage on the right which embodied the orchard that Benedick mentions as his location in 2.3. This tree which visually captured something of the disarray of the Indian electric power supply system was to be the focal point of several moments in the play, both as the site of part of the gulling scenes for both Benedick (on top of it as he eavesdropped) and Beatrice (on its bench while she herself overheard), and also as the crucial place for them to reveal their love to each other as they cradled together on its large swing after Hero's rejection.[11]

The set remained for the most part static and changed radically only once, for the mourning scene at Hero's tomb in 5.3, when the front walls of the courtyard were moved to reveal, in very dark light and with falling rain that drenched the umbrella-carrying mourners, the smoking funeral pyre of Hero. Tom Piper's setting played a crucial role in this remembrance ceremony, with the characters under the rain as they faced away from the audience into the distance so that a sense of communal grief was created that reinforced Claudio's presentation of the epitaph upon Hero's tomb

[10] Also contributing to the possible perception of an implicit acquiescence with the patriarchal structures is Khan's absolute respect for Shakespeare's text: he does not cut out any of the occasionally dropped passages that cast Claudio as particularly callous, such as his jovial teasing of Benedick right after the aborted wedding in 5.1.109-190.

[11] The original design for the thrust stage at the Courtyard Theatre in Stratford had to be adapted to the proscenium theatre in London and the closeness to the audience of the original venue was partly diminished. The foyer of the theatre in Stratford had also provided a space for the audiences' immersion in the sights, sounds and smells of Delhi that could not be reproduced in the West End. Overall, Tom Piper's set design in both venues was a visual feast.

as he follows Leonato's injunction to "sing it to her bones" (5.1.279). This was an important moment of transition between the interrupted wedding and the closing festivities and Khan payd significant attention to it in order to show a powerful display of Claudio's penance at Hero's tomb – and so temper some of the anger his behaviour may have produced both in the Messina-Delhi family and in the Stratford-London audiences. Showing a repentant Claudio in any possible way helps audiences accept that there is "a change in Claudio sufficient to warrant his good fortune in the next scene, where Hero is restored to him" (Cook 1986:198), and the mourning scene in this production was a powerful attempt to counteract the effect of Hero's earlier humiliation at her wedding in 5.1.

The ravishing set created by Tom Piper for the marriage ceremony highlighted the force of the wedding scene, which in the play shows how a woman's chastity is (in Renaissance slang) the "no thing" about which much is done in the play: the rejection of Hero at the altar, which Tom Piper turned into a *mandap*, reverberated in ways that could bring to mind the so-called honour crimes (a term in itself in need of revision) still carried out in a number of cultures. Claudio's public verbal bashing of Hero was amplified not so much by his performing it on a microphone but by the sumptuous and carefully crafted celebration of a happy union that it destroyed. Much of the strength of this moment in the production was visual, since Piper's reconstruction of the colourful setting of a big ceremonial wedding made the dashing of the participants' happy expectations all the more poignant. These were the elaborate preparations and ornate setting appropriate for a formal Punjabi wedding that may appear at odds with Leonato's request to the pandit to carry out "the plain form of marriage" (4.1.1-2), but indeed the text of the play itself suggests spectacular clothes in Margaret's previous description of Hero's sumptuous gown through a comparison with that of a Duchess (3.4.13-22). The mandap was constructed in saffron and pink decorations, with hangings from the ceiling that use the verticality of the stage, so that a link of the wedding celebration to the previous domestic life was established: these rich swaths of pink and saffron fabric were the visual counterpart of the gigantic white sheets hanging from the ceiling before the play's beginning, which were duly removed and folded by some of the house servants as they collected this massive laundry left to dry in the warm air.

Khan's production actually excels in the development of the lower-ranking strands of the story, and here is where the director feels freer to include elements outside the text that may enliven the production. The underbelly of the big house is peopled by girl servants, cook, boy helpers and a number of characters from the lower levels of this India-like world who are shown to be the sustenance of its smooth working. Their moving in and out of the stage, whether it be repairing small appliances, folding the laundry or refreshing the ever-present drinks, shows a society in which servants may be invisible to their masters but certainly not to the audience. From the moment they stepped into the auditorium (and even before, when they entered the foyer at the Stratford venue), members of the audience encountered characters moving around in a domestic space that was vibrantly alive with the hustle and bustle of a big house with extended family, criss-crossing encounters and many chances for observing what others do – a good location for the "noting" at the centre of the play. Street noises blared through the theatre speakers as a reminder of the hot crowded streets outside the household and of chaos pulsing through the public spaces of the city. In this setting, the opening words of the production were granted to the underclass: Ursula, the only female in sari before more formal occasions – and actually unacknowledged as a woman in the programme since she was conflated with the watch member Verges – broke the fourth wall to interact with the arriving audience members while other servants moved around among the seats, and a highly likeable turbaned Sikh Dogberry in an appropriately malapropism-ridden speech made the pre-play "denouncement" that mobile phones and other electronic devices should be turned off.

The one-sentence role of the boy who in 2.3.5 tartly responds to Benedick's request that he bring him a book to the orchard was extended to the point that Anjana Vasan's maid became a comic presence through long passages of the play, repeatedly attempting for instance to take the requested book to Benedick as he overhears in the gulling scene, performing an informal dance to Balthasar's song in 2.3 and running in and out of the staging area before the beginning and after intermission, which in this production took place at the end of 3.2, with Don John planting the seed of suspicion in the minds of both bridegroom Claudio and his friend and mentor Don Pedro, so that the second part opened onto a stage that had

been in part transformed into the *mandap* for the upcoming wedding. The importance of the watch in clearing the confusion of the upper ranks at the wedding was suggested by maintaining the *mandap* in the darkened background while the members of the watch gathered and got ready for duty and later while they began their job by falling sleep, so that the two very different worlds of night watch and wedding celebration were visually linked. The watch in this production captured what they are in the original play: a motley group of citizens that are engaged for that service but who really are more comfortable in their kitchens, shops and other regular places of work. Khan made them a key source of the play's humour but they were treated with respect as the agents of resolution, the lower-ranking forces that brought to justice the evil-makers and opened the way for the restitution of Hero's honour. When their "betters" had been unable to see where truth and honesty lie, this homely crew became the real peace-keeping forces in the play – the counterpart to the upper-class military forces that have solved conflict elsewhere but bring conflict to the peaceful Messina-Delhi domestic environment.

Precisely the director's conception of the military world that impinges upon the domesticity of Messina is another problematic area in the production. The justification for them to appear as UN forces is presented in the programme, in Gintanjali Shahani's essay about Indian peace-keeping forces around the world:

> With Khan's heroes comprising entirely of men from the Indian military, we have a postcolonial adaptation that is keenly aware of India's peacekeeping efforts and diplomatic aspirations in a global arena. Since the 1950s [India] has participated in over 40 peacekeeping missions in four continents, with nearly 9000 personnel in operations worldwide. (Shahani 2012)

Despite Shahani's enthusiasm about the inclusion of this commonly overlooked aspect of Indian reality, the arrival of the military men in the uniform and blue berets of UN peace-keeping forces was not easy for audiences to grasp. Their coming did not powerfully convey the contrasting worlds of war and domestic life, "the gulf between the off-duty military, dreaming up ways to pass the time, and the civilian population" (Billington 2012); their entrance did not transmit the sense of a war ending, nor did Don Pedro's appearance project the image of a dignified superior who would therefore be in a

position of authority to take command of the fictional world of the play.

These military uniforms were also used in another key moment of the play with equally mixed results. Khan's choice of resources for the masquerade in 2.1 in which Don Pedro woos Hero on behalf of Claudio played with cross-dressing: the women danced in military jackets, blue berets and dark sunglasses, while the men wore scarves over their heads as they pretended that they were women – Antonio's elderly face is even covered with makeup.[12] The director's intention was to reflect the fact that in many Indian celebrations, there are times "when men and women gather separately, with the ladies pretending to dance like the men and the men imitating the women to make their friends laugh" ("RSC *Much Ado*"). On the stage, however, this transformation of the characters was not easy to grasp, and the masquerade scene became a site of uncertainty, a celebration of sorts that is not fully understood. Khan's choice could be sensed as a momentary reversal of gender roles, with the women in charge of the conversation and the men coyly (and for the purpose of disguise) hiding behind their scarves as veils, so that the playful gender-crossing momentarily empowers the female members of the community – so briefly indeed that soon their inequality will burst into the tragedy of the defamed Hero unable to speak for herself.[13] This brief upturning of the power structures is a carnival-like party that breaks the established order for a moment only to channel it back to its usual shape. And the fact remains that as in the original Shakespearean text Hero is mostly silent, her condition as a subjugated female a reality in the fictional world of the play that is in part veiled by the dazzling final celebrations of this Messina-Delhi society as it welcomes all its members (the evil Don John excepted)

[12] In this scene Benedick is the only man that is fully dressed as female in a sari that turns Paul Bhattacharje's lanky figure into quite a ridiculous visual enactment of Beatrice's injunction that he is Don Pedro's jester (2.1.137). His comic body as female is also used in the gulling scene, the latter part of which he spends as a covered elderly woman, cleaning Don Pedro's and Claudio's shoes as they speak apparently unaware of his presence.

[13] The production suggests that Don John is disturbed by his constraints as a homosexual and there are hints that he is attracted to Claudio. The source of his malcontent status which the early modern audiences could easily grasp as stemming from his being a bastard brother is thus turned into the cankerous care of a misfit who is sexually oppressed, so that his words "I cannot hide what I am. I must be sad when I have cause, and smile at no man's jests" (1.3.12-14) resonate differently.

into a dance, a vibrant Bollywood moment of sheer enjoyment and communal harmony.

Khan's play was an attempt to produce Shakespeare *massala* that is spiced enough to appeal to most British (and possibly international) palates in its recreation on Stratford and London stages of a vision of contemporary Delhi that attempts to balance the exotic and the familiar to produce distance yet recognition, so that most spectators can relate to it in some way – even if those in the British audiences that trace family and emotional ties to the Indian subcontinent experience something like Salman Rushdie's "Indias of the mind" (Rushdie 1991:10), the sense that they are recreating in their imaginations a portrait of a homeland they may have never actually seen and experienced. Despite the problematic areas that have been discussed above, Khan's *Much Ado about Nothing* had the power to bring new audiences to Shakespeare. All the RSC productions during the World Shakespeare Festival explored other cultures through Shakespeare's plays, and as the company keeps opening up its work to the world,[14] this first all-Asian production of a Shakespearean play was an attempt to reclaim the Bard for Asian-British and other ethnic minorities in Britain as other than the foreign and colonizing agent of their ancestors. The director of the British Museum, which in 2012 hosted an exhibition entitled "Shakespeare: Staging the World", suggests that the professional theatre in Shakespeare's time was indeed "the first mass medium for the presentation of cultures of the world to a wide public [since] in Shakespeare's time the globe was brought to life on the bare platform of the Globe Theatre in Southwark" (MacGregor 2012:9). Iqbal Khan was the first Asian-British director to do a major Royal Shakespeare Company play – curiously enough, the same Shakespearean comedy that started their repertoire when the company was created in 1961. It would be an exaggeration to say that Iqbal Khan's production of *Much Ado about Nothing* was a radical reinvention of the play, but its Indian-inflected prose and poetry and Punjabi-clad festivities opened the Stratford and London stages of the RSC for a celebration of the Bard not only as the world's playwright but, crucially, as the playwright of all Britons: at a time

[14] In the autumn of 2012 it presented its first Chinese production, *The Orphan of Zhao,* the so-called Chinese *Hamlet* – with a major controversy over its not casting enough British-Asian actors.

when global and worldwide Shakespeares are becoming the centre of scholars' and spectators' attention, producing this Delhi Shakespeare by an all British-Asian ensemble was yet another attempt to bring the Bard home.

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