

Performing Shakespeare in Colonial Southeast Asia

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Colonialism has often been decried, even demonized, by postcolonial historians and critics as one of the root causes of a profound alienation of native peoples from their own cultures and histories. Indeed, colonial education did much to diminish local cultures in the process of upholding the supremacy of western modernity. What is also true, however, is that in the introduction of the knowledges of modernity, colonial powers were not always or not absolutely successful in containing its effects and assimilations into local cultures. Often the frames of history and politics tend towards totalizing theories of colonialism and its postcolonial effects; using the frame of culture, on the other hand, problematizes any facile conclusions one might otherwise arrive at and reveals a more nuanced picture of colonialism and its aftermaths.

William Shakespeare, that great English writer, has been vital in the propagation of Western knowledges throughout colonial regimes. Often held up as the paragon not only of English literature but also even of Englishness itself, the spread of Shakespeare became synonymous with the “civilizing” mission of colonialism. This paper looks at the specifics of Shakespearean productions and reproductions in the colonial cultures of Malaysia and the Philippines to interrogate the dynamics of colonial cultural production and shed new light on our understanding of the monoliths “colonialism” and “Shakespeare.” It begins by looking at the history of Shakespearean production in colonial schools in British Malaya and the American Philippines. It then goes on to investigate specific performances in light of local cultures and histories, confronting the “politics of location” of these intercultural encounters. Finally, it leaves the confines of the colonial school and glances at Shakespearean adaptations by the cultures at large, specifically at the Malay *bangsawan*, to further illustrate the uncontainable dynamics of colonial cultural production.

In British Malaya, performances of Shakespearean plays were mounted primarily as an aid to pedagogy. Aside from the occasional “professional” touring companies, school organizations – dramatic or literary clubs – put on performances for the benefit of students but there were also open to the community at large. The earliest performance took place in 1916 when the Anglo Chinese School (ACS) in Ipoh produced **Julius Caesar** (Ho, 1964: 539). On April 11, 1918, a Malay translation of **A Midsummer Night’s Dream** is staged at the Penang Town Hall by students from the Penang Free School (Jalaludin, 2004). Despite the language used in the production, an extant photograph of the cast held by the Free School archives shows the cast in (approximately) Elizabethan costumes. In 1921, **Julius Caesar** is performed in Malay dress at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK). This production might well have been the earliest modern dress production of Shakespeare in the colony. The MCKK also staged **The Merchant of Venice** in 1922 and **A Midsummer Night’s Dream** in 1928 (Khasnor, 1996: 78).

The most ambitious productions of the 1920s though were those put on under the direction of Richard Sidney at the Victoria Institution (VI). In 1924, the school staged a production of **Twelfth Night** at the Kuala Lumpur Town Hall that was also taken on tour to Singapore (Victorian 1:2 March 1924:71). Emboldened by the success of that production, VI then produced **1Henry 4** the following year and took both plays on tour through Penang, Ipoh, and Singapore. (Victorian 1:4, December 1924:159-160). After a lull in productions in the years of the Depression and the War, the VI continues its rather impressive record of performances in the postwar years. To celebrate reopening of school, a ceremony was held on 11 October 1946 where scenes from **As You Like It** were staged (Doraisamy, 1993:166). The trial scene from **Merchant** was performed at a concert on April 12, 1949. (Doraisamy, 1993:180) In 1952, the school returned to full-length performances with a five-night run of **The Merchant of Venice** at the Kuala Lumpur Town Hall (Doraisamy, 1993:193). **Twelfth Night** was staged again in 1953 and the following year saw a revival of **1 Henry IV** that played for five nights at the Kuala Lumpur Town Hall as well. (Doraisamy, 1993:194) In 1956, **A Comedy of Errors** is staged (Doraisamy, 1993:215).

In the years immediately before and after World War 2, excerpts from Shakespearean plays also continue to be a feature of MCKK school life, albeit on a more modest scale. The trial scene from **The Merchant of Venice** is performed both at a concert before the school governors in June 1940 and at the Terminal Concert later that year (Malay College Magazine 1:2 12: 44). The first postwar performances at this school were presentations of the scene of Caesar's murder from **Julius Caesar** and the trial scene from **Merchant** in December 1947 (MCM 1:3: 29). Two different scenes from **Macbeth** were also staged in 1948 and 1949 (MCM 1:4: 80; 1:5: 45).

While VI's performance record, and to a lesser extent MCKK's, is impressive indeed, the claim to Shakespearean performance ground-zero during the British colonial period is rightfully made by the Anglo Chinese School in Ipoh. Shakespeare debuts on the Ipoh stage with **Julius Caesar** in 1916. The pre-War years witnessed productions of **The Tempest** in 1927, **The Merchant of Venice** in 1928, **Julius Caesar** again in 1929 and **Twelfth Night** in 1932. The years of the depression and World War 2 saw a halt in productions that were picked up again in the post-war years. **Macbeth** was staged in 1949; **Twelfth Night** and **Richard 2** in 1950; **Julius Caesar** and **Othello** in 1951; **Merchant** in 1952; **As You Like It** in 1953; **Macbeth** in 1954; **Julius Caesar** in 1956; and **The Winter's Tale** in 1957 (Ho, 1964). These performances were all full-length productions, involving a great number of student and faculty members, and were viewed by students from ACS and other schools in Perak and the public at large. In fact, these performances soon developed into a school tradition and the ACS was often referred to as "Stratford-on-Kinta."

All these student performances were curriculum-driven and the yearly repertoire was set not so much by individual directors but was determined by the set play for the year's Cambridge examinations. Students frequently came to performances armed with texts as they were often also objects of study and exam preparation that year. Performances were deemed valuable primarily because they were educational. Whatever artistic merits they may have or have not possessed was of secondary concern to pedagogical ones – performances were a valuable learning tool for both participants and audiences (Subramanian and Chin, 2006).

Similarly, the pedagogical imperative also shaped Shakespeare in the Philippines. Two forms of Shakespearean performances emerged in schools – the dramatic and the academic. The academic Shakespeare came in the form of memorized set pieces performed in oratorical and declamation contests or as a subject for moot courts practiced in student debate societies. The popularity of certain set pieces of Shakespearean declamation – “The quality of mercy is not strained” or “Friends, Romans, countrymen...” can be gleaned from programs of numerous school declamation activities across the colony. Another curious use to which Shakespeare has been put in colonial education is as a subject of moot courts to train students in public speaking and debate. School newspapers such as Ateneo’s *Guidon* feature rather amusing headlines and articles such as “Seniors Vote Hamlet Sane,” (*Guidon* 1:16:5) or “All Ready for Macbeth Trial, To Arraign Defendant September 21,”(*Guidon* 1:7: 1) or “Eloquence of Defense Saves Macbeth,” (*Guidon* 1:8: 1) or “Shylock Acquitted by Senior Debaters.” (*Guidon* 2:6: 3)

To augment the aims of language education, dramatic performances of plays, predominantly Shakespearean, were also sponsored by schools. Deeply entwined with the aims of training in the English language, there are no records of performances of Shakespearean plays in any of the native languages in Philippine schools in the American colonial period. School performances begin earlier in the Philippines than in British Malaya. In 1910, **As You Like It** was performed by students of the Philippine Normal School (Jamias, 1962: 106). The significance of Shakespeare to American colonial education in the Philippines is underscored in its dramatic stage inaugural at the Normal School, an institution specifically established for the training of Filipino teachers. In the same year, students at the Ateneo De Manila, a Jesuit-run boy’s school, staged **The Merchant of Venice** (Bernad,1977: 4). The following year, 1911, marked the performance of the Pyramus and Thisbe scene from Shakespeare’s **A Midsummer Night’s Dream** and excerpts from **Julius Caesar** at the Silliman Institute in Dumaguete, a Presbyterian-run mission school in central Philippines. In the following year, the students at Silliman staged a full-length version of **The Merchant of Venice** (Carson, 1967: 53). The trial scene from this play is staged at the University of the Philippines in Los Banos in 1920 (*Philippinensian* 1920: 128). An all-female cast at St. Theresa’s College in Manila also performed the same play in 1924. (Bernad, 1977: 16)

The early history of Shakespearean productions in Philippine schools attests to the over-all popularity of **The Merchant of Venice**. It also indicates the importance of two institutions in that history. The Ateneo De Manila presented a number of Shakespearean plays through the colonial years – **Richard III** (1917), **Julius Caesar** (1921, 1930), **Macbeth** (1923), **King Lear** (1933) (Bernad, 1977). These were lavish productions that often involved students from other schools around Manila and were staged at the Manila Grand Opera House to audiences that included students and Manila society at large. A contemporary review illustrates the significance of these student productions; of the 1933 production of **King Lear**, the *El Debate* reported:

Before a packed audience, which included high government officials, church prelates, and distinguished families from Manila and the provinces, the Ateneo presented *King Lear* at the Manila Grand Opera House. The performance once

more confirmed the fame that the Ateneo players have enjoyed for presenting the best amateur plays in the Islands. (in Bernad, 1977: 84)

Performances at the Ateneo also included productions of Shakespearean scenes usually performed during school functions like the performance of the trial scene from **Merchant** as part of the 1925 commencement program, the graveyard scene from **Hamlet** at the Reading of Honors in 1930, and a scene from the fourth act of **King John** at the Reading of Honors in 1932 (Bernad, 1977: 47-49).

In Dumaguete, Silliman Institute has an even more spectacular record of Shakespearean performances. In the second decade of colonial rule alone, Silliman produces versions of **Merchant** (1912), **Julius Caesar** (1911, 1916), **Othello** (1915), **Macbeth** (1914), and **Hamlet** (1918)ⁱ. Like the Ateneo productions, the Silliman productions also commanded large audiences that included members of the community and surrounding areas – not just schoolboys and schoolgirls. References to the “overcrowded Assembly Hall” usually accompanied reviews of plays put on as part of what had quickly become the “Annual Shakespearean Drama” tradition of the school. Contemporary accounts make this evident.

The Annual Shakespearean Drama is always an attractive feature of the closing week. As an attest of the popularity of the former attractions Silliman Hall was packed to overflowing on Monday evening to witness the presentation of **Julius Caesar**. (*Silliman Truth*, 15:5: 1)

The class of 1918 presented in their Junior Year Shakespeare’s Tragedy of *Hamlet*. As in other years the play was given twice in order to give the Silliman boys and the Dumaguete and the neighboring friends an opportunity to see and enjoy it. In these evenings the Assembly Hall of Silliman was overcrowded. (*The Portal*, 1918: 57)

The histories of school-based Shakespearean performances in British Malaya and in the American Philippines reveal some striking similarities. Expectedly, elite institutions like the Victoria Institution in Kuala Lumpur or the Ateneo De Manila take the lead with lavish, even touring, productions of the plays. In terms of frequency of production, however, Shakespeare is performed more often in colonial peripheries. Both the Anglo Chinese School and Silliman Institute are located away from capital cities and imperial centers. Their performance records disrupt orthodox paradigms of colonialism that posit a center/capital from which colonial culture emanates. In some ways, it seems to suggest that Shakespearean production was a means for some claim to “culture” from the peripheries arising out of a sort of defensiveness of the provincial. On the other hand, it may also indicate that Shakespearean productions become singularly popular in locations where there were fewer competing forms of entertainment than would have been available in imperial capitals. It is intriguing to speculate on this phenomenon. Even more intriguing is the fact that both institutions are not British as one might expect strident purveyors of Shakespearean culture to be but American-run mission schools.ⁱⁱ

Frequent performances of the work of a colonial playwright, however, is symptomatic of a predisposition to colonialism, or the “colonial mentality”, of its recipient culture only if one fails to account for the aesthetic as an informing category of cultural

phenomena like plays. The fact of performance does not constitute the complete picture. Performance, after all, is a highly-complex and unstable amalgamation of various modes of signification capable of containing layers of meaning. Aside from the performed text, elements like music, lighting, costumes, non-verbal acting, or even the manner in which lines from the text are delivered (or not) come together in various and specific ways each time a play is performed. Performance traditions and cultural locations invariably influence the ways in which these texts are staged and received. As the intercultural theatre theorist, Rustom Bharucha has demonstrated, it is important to confront what he calls “the politics of location” each time a play is performed across cultures. Where a play is performed matters as much as its origins. In each intercultural encounter, there are wider scopes and deeper implications to performance than are involved in indigenous theater. Simply put, there is more here than meets the eye. And that “more,” in a sense, is that which meets the eye.

The visual elements of performance, for example, carry a specific weight in the traditions of Philippine theatrical forms. Just before the first stagings of Shakespearean plays by educational institutions, the local theaters were performing the wildly popular “seditious plays.” These plays took the form of melodramatic allegories of the American oppression, Filipino resistance, and the inevitable freedom of Inang Bayan (Mother Country). The thrill of watching these plays came from decoding the allegory and waiting for the visual cues that sent local audiences into a frenzy. Usually, this took the form of the momentary appearance of the Philippine flag on the stage via strategically located actors wearing the colors of the republic’s flag. Theatrical performance in the Philippines has a very strong history of being used as a means of subversion and it also created an audience very attuned to the visual elements of drama.ⁱⁱⁱ

These visual elements were also shared amongst the several types of theatrical forms. For instance, one of the most widely-performed dramas in the Philippines is the Lenten passion play. In its indigenous form, the *senakulo* harkens back to medieval times where every town puts on its version of Christ’s passion, involving a variety of townsfolk and usually enacted in the streets in various parts of the town. These theatrical practices are deeply ingrained in the cultural psyche and arguably influenced the “look” of even the early Shakespearean plays. The costumes used in productions were sometimes extremely similar to the costumes used in the passion plays. Extant photographs of Shakespearean productions in the early twentieth century provide multiple examples of Shakespearean heroes depicted as Christ figures.

Unlike the audience of Shakespeare’s day who supposedly were more attuned to the language, colonial audiences in the Philippines responded more strongly to visual elements like costume. Indeed, contemporary reviews tend to highlight costumes, for instance, these excerpts from two performances of plays at Silliman University in the Southern island of Negros:

“The Merchant of Venice” given complete during the Commencement Exercises of the year 1911-1912 ... was completely and historically costumed and staged. Money was not spared to furnish the old-time costumes of the sixteenth century (*Silliman Annual*, 1913: 33)

...tuesday evening was given to the presentation of **Macbeth** by the students... The scenery prepared by Mr. Holmes and Mr. Glunz was very adequate and the costumes made entirely in Dumaguete under the direction of Mr. Carlos Smith were all that could be desired. It seemed hardly possible that costumes so suggestive of Scotland could be thus produced. But they were. (*Silliman Truth*, 13:5&6: 3)

The reproduction of sixteenth century Venice or Scotland in Dumaguete, however, is not as unproblematic as these reviews make it seem. In **Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics**, Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins (1996) explain “the paradox of costume’s simultaneous specificity *and* versatility” that “makes it an unstable sign/site of power.”

How and what the performing body signifies are closely related to the ways in which it is framed for the viewer’s consumption. The most obvious framing, costume, is particularly resonant since it can (mis)identify race, gender, class, and creed, and make visible the status associated with such markers of difference. ...The destabilising force of costume is even more obvious when the colonised subject wears the costume of the coloniser, particularly when the former dresses “up” or chooses a garment that exceeds his/her assigned status within the colonial hierarchy. Cultural cross-dressing and dressing “up” enact the dressing down of sartorial and cultural limitations by fabricating self-conscious strategies for resisting the power inherent even in the coloniser’s dress codes. (244-245)

While costumes are typically used to evoke a specific time and culture, their existence onstage on bodies from another time and culture creates an instant rupture in the naturalness of the scene. No matter how "authentic" the costumes may be, their being on "little, brown" bodies calls attention to their strangeness. Costumes, moreover, provide the means for natives to “counter-exoticize” colonial culture. The bodies onstage, native schoolchildren clad in Scottish or Venetian garb, were objects of discrepant display and agents of sartorial subversion. What is highlighted in performance is distance, not universality, as the goals of colonial pedagogy would otherwise insist. In a reversal of the crucial colonial strategy of display or laying bare, manifested through apparatuses such as the census or colonial photography, it affords the natives the mastery of the gaze. In short, it gives them the right to stare. And with staring comes the power to subject colonial culture to critical evaluation.

Critical evaluation was, in a sense, the logical outcome of the engagements between the cultures of the colonizers and the colonized via educational institutions. Specifically, Shakespearean performances in colonial schools afforded native students the opportunity to “play at” and “play with” the colonial culture, a rare occasion for mastery over the colonial language that had so mastered them. For example, one wonders about what really went on in the minds of student actors and audience in the 1948 production of scenes from *Julius Caesar* staged at the Penang Free School where the headmaster, Mr. D. Roper played Caesar and among the scenes performed was the murder of Caesar? (*Penang Free School Magazine*, 1:6: 46-48) Or similarly, in the 1951 production of **Julius Caesar** at ACS Ipoh, when the student-actor conspirators finally stabbed Caesar who was played by the teacher-director, Harold Wakefield.

(Ho, 1964: 540-541) What were the student audiences thinking as they watched the Victoria Institution's venerable headmaster, Richard Sidney, fool around in tights as Feste the Clown in the 1926 production of **Twelfth Night**? (Sidney, 1927: 117-126)^{iv} Surely, scenes like these would have gone unnoticed by some audiences but how can we know for sure that all viewers would have been passive suspenders of disbelief? That no one would have relished the thrill of watching the colonial headmaster as clown and servant or worse, actually enjoy the schoolboy fantasy of killing the (white) teacher come to life at least briefly onstage. The inversions and subversions of authority enabled, albeit momentarily, by Shakespearean performances cannot easily be discounted.

In the encouragement of "play," performances opened up avenues of critical and creative thinking. Creativity had to be exercised sometimes given the constraints of local productions. For instance, a review of a performance of the trial scene from **The Merchant of Venice** at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar marvels at how "the boys showed much ingenuity in making cravats out of pastel papers, renaissance cloaks out of sarongs, and 16th century footwear out of 20th century gym shoes." (MCM 1:3: 29) More importantly, they allowed students to engage with Shakespeare in innovative, relevant, even radical ways. Another performance of the same trial scene, this time at the Victoria Institution in 1949 illustrates this point very well.

The trial scene from **The Merchant of Venice** was perhaps the best item of the show... Except for Shylock who was dressed as a local "chettiar" or money-lender, the rest of the cast wore Malay costume. The effect was striking... (*The Victorian* 16:4: 12)

Even more striking was Wang Gung Wu's proposed production of **Othello** at the Anglo Chinese School in Ipoh in 1952. He wanted to present the play "as a study in racial conflict" and have "Othello portrayed by an Indian and Desdemona be played by a Chinese." (Ho, 1964: 541). While the idea was subsequently overruled and a more traditional production was mounted, the idea represents the extent to which critical thought was beginning to be applied even on the most "sacred" of colonial icons. Both the Victoria Institution production of the "chettiar" **Merchant** and the Anglo Chinese School almost-production of the Indian-Chinese **Othello** begin to look at Shakespeare through critical eyes. Instead of aiming for pure reproduction of Western culture on eastern stages, these performances move toward an adaptation of Shakespeare made more real and relevant to daily lives. In place of the exotic Jew, they took on real moneylenders in their real lives; in place of the abstract conflict between Christians and Moors, the real tensions of a multicultural society that is colonialism's effect.

The escape of colonial cultural control and the native assimilation and appropriation of Shakespearean culture are even more starkly exemplified by the *bangsawan* or the Malay Opera. A form derived from Parsi theater and originated in Penang in the late nineteenth century, this hybrid form utilized stories and elements from a range of sources – Chinese Operas, Indian mythology, Malay legends and folklore, Arabic fairy tales, Shakespearean drama. Primarily commercial, these *bangsawans* had to appeal to audiences from a variety of class and racial backgrounds that probably accounted for the diversity of the form. Elements from various sources were freely adapted and improvised upon by talented actors who worked with no fixed scripts,

only with fixed styles of speech, character, and scene types. Sometimes performances that began around eight or nine in the evening ran into the early morning hours if audiences seemed to be appreciative of the actors' improvisational efforts. (Tan, 1993)

Expectedly Shakespearean plays adapted for the *bangsawan* departed radically from the originals, usually in response to cultural sensitivities, audience tastes, and the exigencies of performance. For example, R.O. Winstedt reviews a 1908 performance of a *bangsawan* **Hamlet** and notes "scenes that offend Malay taste or superstition like the grave-digger scene or the scene where Hamlet upbraids his mother... are banished from the boards of the *bangsawan*." The absence of Western generic distinctions and the mixing of tragedy and comedy characterized the form. In various versions of **Hamlet**, the ghost of Hamlet's father appears not to soldiers but to clowns whose frightened antics amused the audiences to no end. Vigorous and physical acting styles turned tragic scenes into comic ones. A review of a 1932 performance of **Hamlet** described King Claudius's death scene where "he pranced around like a scalded cat and delighted the little boys with some really superb face-pulling before he was allowed to die." (Tan, 1993: 124) Stage violence also figured in the rejection of Ophelia. In one performance, the reviewer notes that Hamlet "knocked Ophelia down eight times." (Tan, 1993: 124) Winstedt (1908) similarly reports that in the version he viewed featured excessive violence, in this case brought on by the rivalry between actresses playing Hamlet and Ophelia.

Hamlet strolls on to the stage and hotly refuses to marry the lady, singing of his dislike and finally spitting at and spurning her. This scene is very spirited and effective, as the ladies playing the parts of Hamlet and Ophelia are rival prima donnas and jealous.

The *bangsawans* also employed "extra turns" – songs, dances, comedy routines, magic acts – at random intervals during the performance. A 1932 **Hamlet**, for instance, featured the following "entertainments" within the play.

After the love scene between Hamlet and Ophelia, a Court Lady glided in and sang: "What are you waiting for now?"... [Then the audience was given] ... a unique insight into life at the Danish Court; seven ladies of high degree came and gave exquisite shimmy; Ophelia sang appallingly in her private apartments, and Horatio with a few waves of his hands made a lady float in mid-air and passed a golden hoop round her to show that there was no deception. (*Straits Echo*, 5 October 1932; cited in Tan, 1993: 127)

Whereas colonial educational institutions held up Shakespeare as the apogee of British culture, on the *bangsawan* stage Shakespearean drama was liberally modified to suit Malay tastes with stunning disregard for the cultural icon. Indeed, Winstedt characterizes the *bangsawan* **Hamlet** as "a perverted example of Shakespeare's world-wide popularity." What seemed to be perversion to Winstedt, however, was obviously perceived as improvement by native theater practitioners and was enjoyed as such by local audiences.

Malay *bangsawans*, and even some student productions of Shakespearean dramas in the colonial period vividly illustrate the uncontrollable dynamics of colonial cultural production. It is true that colonial education sought to impose Western standards of culture and education in these Southeast Asian territories and has since been repeatedly decried by postcolonial nationalist critics and historians who are quick to “blame” colonial education for all forms of postcolonial ills. What is also true, however, is that colonial education was not always received by the colonized as was envisioned by the colonizers. This is clearly evinced from the history of the colonial icon Shakespeare in the cultures of the Philippines and Malaysia. Coming into contact with thriving and vibrant local cultures and native students, colonial education was inevitably reshaped and was ultimately just another element in the forging of a new culture. Even as colonial regimes sought to regulate native populations through a variety of means – significant among them the formation of a “civilized” citizenry via colonial education – the cultural field provides ample proof that absolute regulation was impossible.

ⁱ Data on the performance history of Shakespearean plays at the Silliman Institute are culled from Carson (1965), *Silliman Annual* (1913), *The Portal* (1918), *Silliman Truth* (1914, 1915, & 1916), and Hibbard (1926). In addition to its impressive record of Shakespearean performances, The Silliman Institution was the first educational institution in the country to have women play women’s parts onstage.

ⁱⁱ For elaborations on the geographies of colonialism and Shakespearean performances, see Ick, “Local Shakespeares, Shakespearean Locales”; for the American investments in Shakespeare and colonial education, see Ick, “Ilonggos, Igorottes, Merchants, and Jews: Shakespeare and American Colonial Education in the Philippines”

ⁱⁱⁱ Further discussions of the seditious plays, with specific reference to the visual elements as subversion, are to be found in Bonifacio, Fernandez, and Rafael.

^{iv} Sidney writes at length about his ambitious productions at the Victoria Institution in **In British Malaya Today**, chapters 4, 10, and 11

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