



**“What’s Past is  
Prologue”:  
Postcolonialism,  
Globalisation, and  
the Demystification of  
Shakespeare in  
Malaysia**

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**Abstract**

Since 2011, *Shakespeare Demystified*, a series of productions with a pedagogical focus, has been transforming the landscape of Shakespearean performances in Malaysia. It is the closest Malaysia currently has to a regular Shakespeare season and the actors behind it comprise the only theatrical group committed to bringing Shakespeare to the stage. But *Shakespeare Demystified* continues a long Malaysian tradition of performing Shakespeare for educational purposes, which traces its origins to colonial Malaya. This paper examines the cultural significances of *Shakespeare Demystified*, locating it within the history and development of English-language Shakespearean performances in Malaysia while attending to recent shifts in local engagements with the Bard as result of the increasing globalisation of education.

**Keywords:** Malaysian Shakespeare, Asian Shakespeare, postcolonial Shakespeare, education, globalisation, theatre

*We all were sea-swallowed, though some cast again,  
And by that destiny to perform an act  
Whereof what's past is prologue, what to come  
In your and my discharge!*

*(The Tempest, 2.1, 251-54)*

**R**ushing into the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (KLPAAC) on a Friday evening in May, I encounter a group of teenagers, not above sixteen years old in my estimate, in the foyer. In their heavy make-up, black dresses and stilettos, they seem set to paint the town red. But then they enter the auditorium with me, where I am confronted with row upon row of other excited teens, the sameness in age and temperament broken only by the occasional adult chaperon. A red cloth lies in a heap on the empty stage and a high-pitched squeal breaks out behind me: "Oh my gosh! There's a man underneath!" At least a dozen smartphones immediately appear, joining the other gadgets already in hand for numerous selfies and, most likely, multiple updates on social media boasting attendance at *Shakespeare Demystified: Macbeth*.

Since 2011, *Shakespeare Demystified*, a series of productions with a pedagogical focus, has been transforming the landscape of Shakespearean performances in Malaysia. The series is the closest the nation has to a regular Shakespeare season; although a staggering number of productions were mounted in 2016, in conjunction with the four-hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's death, professional Shakespearean productions are few and far between at other times. And Kuala Lumpur Shakespeare Players (KLSP), under whose umbrella the series is produced, is at present Malaysia's only theatrical group committed to bringing Shakespeare to the stage.

*Shakespeare Demystified* traces its origins to two workshops conducted in 2009 and 2010 by Australian director Jeff Kevin, which encouraged actors to discover new ways of presenting Shakespeare in order to increase an audience's comprehension of, and sense of connection to, the texts. After these ended, four workshop alumnae roped in a fifth actor to conceptualize and found the *Shakespeare Demystified* series, which debuted in June 2011 with *Shakespeare Demystified: Julius Caesar*. Audiences have since been treated to annual installments: *The Merchant of Venice* (2012), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (2013), *Hamlet: A Performance Lecture* (2014), *Othello* (2015), *The Merchant of Venice* (2016), and *Macbeth* (2017). Cast and crew vary from one production to the next; of the five founding members, only Lim Soon Heng and Lim Kien

Lee have been involved in every production. Typically, however, a *Shakespeare Demystified* production sees a mixture of professional and amateur actors. For example, 2013 saw David H. Lim, a finance executive in his second foray onto the professional stage, working alongside Anne James, an actor and dancer with over thirty years' experience, and founding member Qahar Aqilah, who trained in Michael Howard Studios, New York.

Also typical is the driving vision to educate, in line with its self-professed mission to “un-scarify Shakespeare.” *Shakespeare Demystified* performances do not exceed 100 minutes. Texts are heavily abridged, with minor characters, subsidiary action and large portions of dialogue regularly excised, to allow performances to conclude within that period. But time is allocated for audience-friendly exposition in which actors break the fourth wall to “de-mystify” the oddities and complexities of Shakespearean language and ensure that audiences are not cast adrift in a sea of Elizabethan words. They summarize what has transpired, introduce subsequent action, and elucidate lines and allusions not immediately accessible to the average Malaysian. Once the performance ends, audiences are invited to sit down with the cast for fifteen-minute question-and-answer sessions. In this, *Shakespeare Demystified* continues a long Malaysian tradition of performing Shakespeare for educational purposes. This paper examines the cultural significances of *Shakespeare Demystified*, locating it within the history and development of English-language Shakespearean performances in Malaysia while attending to recent shifts in local engagements with the Bard.

### **“All were sea-swallowed”: Shakespeare in Malaya and Post-colonial Malaysia**

Whereas Malay-language productions of Shakespeare were performed by professionals as early as 1908, when *bangsawan* troupes put on liberal adaptations of Shakespearean plays in an operatic style (Abdullah, “Bangsawan Shakespeare”), the performance of Shakespeare in English can only be traced to the early twentieth century, and sprang directly from the establishing of English-medium schools in Malaysia (Ick, “Performing Shakespeare”).

British colonization of then-Malaya began in 1786 when the northern island of Penang was ceded to the East India Company. By 1909, all fourteen states had come under British rule, either as Crown Colonies or through treaties between Malay rulers and British officials. The arrival of the British was accompanied by the introduction of English-medium schools, although the earliest were established by missionaries and not the British government. No single curriculum was adopted, each school guided by its religious or administrative impetus. However, in 1891, all English-medium schools adopted a common syllabus: students were prepared for the Cambridge Certificate examinations, which required them to study Shakespeare's plays among other things (Ooi 835).

Student productions of Shakespeare soon followed, the most illustrious of which were by the Ipoh Anglo-Chinese School and Victoria Institution Kuala Lumpur. The pedagogical focus of these endeavours is obvious. Productions repeatedly corresponded with the prescriptions of the Cambridge syllabus; Victoria Institution's *Twelfth Night* (1924) and the Ipoh Anglo-Chinese School's *The Tempest* (1927), *The Merchant of Venice* (1928), and *Julius Caesar* (1929) brought to life exam texts for those years (Sidney 117-26; Ho 539-43). Reviews of performances also centred on their educational value. Victoria Institution's *Twelfth Night* was lauded by one reviewer because “the effect on those who took part in it, from an educational point of view ought to be excellent” (qtd. in Sidney 122). And although the headmaster of Victoria Institution chose *I Henry IV* for the 1925 production, hoping to encourage students to read beyond prescribed texts, the production eventually toured alongside a revival of *Twelfth Night*, with the educational value of the performances once

more celebrated. In Malacca, the Inspector of Schools drummed up support for the performances by sending a circular to schools asserting that it was “not possible to exaggerate the educational value” of Victoria Institution’s undertaking. In Singapore, a local daily hailed the performances as being “of great significance for the future welfare of education throughout Malaya” (qtd. in Sidney 128, 134).

Pedagogical considerations also shaped the Shakespearean performances staged by Malayan Arts Theatre Group (MATG), founded in 1951 under the auspices of the British Council. Its constitution stated that one of the club’s objectives was “to produce at least one play each year which will benefit students” (qtd. in Alwi), and Shakespeare was obviously deemed the best playwright for this purpose; in the fifteen years between 1951 and 1966, MATG staged a total of eleven Shakespearean plays (Rowland i-viii). Judging from the composition of audiences at these shows, MATG’s objectives were indisputably met. Syed Alwi, one of its founding members, reminisces, “I remember the times when the auditorium [was] filled with students watching Shakespeare while turning pages of the text on their laps to follow the play.” K. Das similarly observed that there existed “no real audience for Shakespeare” apart from “the ‘sure attendance’ of Senior Cambridge students” (qtd. in Abdullah, “Shakespeare in Malaysia” 7).

Underpinning this emphasis on the educational value of Shakespeare was the colonial impulse to uplift the minds of the colonized, with the attendant assumption of the superiority of the British for whom Shakespeare was an organic part of their beings. Reflecting the inter-relation of theatre, education, and colonization, the constitution of MATG specified the inclusion of a British Council representative and a government education officer among its 35 members. Furthermore, as Alwi recalls, “From the start ... the British Council direct[ed] MATG to target the English schools as the main sphere of its activities...As explained to me by one of my bosses during a talking-to, the British Council is an agency to spread British culture and cultural values, what better way than to do it through schools using literature and the arts.” In a similar vein, Victoria Institution’s productions were defended on the grounds that “even in Malaya there should be a desire to savour some of the higher graces of life” and that it was “a good thing that the young are given the opportunity while their minds are still able to receive the necessary impression” (qtd. in Sidney 132). In this light, Sidney’s pride that the set of *Twelfth Night* looked “[n]othing like Malaya” smacks of more than an early twentieth-century desire to present the play as ‘realistically’ as possible. Rather, it was necessary that the Bard displaced any trace of the local. Sidney’s joy that the “Chinese boy with eyes set far apart and high cheek bones” had been rendered unrecognizable through a diligent application of make-up appears to have sprung from the same colonial arrogance as the implicit mockery of another actor’s accent revealed in Sidney’s too-faithful transcription of his lines: “do not *tink* I have *veet* enough to lie straight in my bed” (Sidney 117, 119). As Ick argues, “held up as the paragon not only of English literature but also of Englishness and therefore, in the convoluted logic of imperial ideologies, of civilization itself, the spread of Shakespeare became synonymous with the ‘civilizing’ mission of colonialism” (“Unknown Accents” 292).

This intertwining of Shakespearean performances with the colonial enterprise led eventually to the decline of the former in postcolonial Malaysia. From 1967, MATG responded to local developments by ceasing to stage Shakespeare. That year, the National Language Act placed the Malay language at the centre of nation-building, and government policies were promptly rolled out to establish Malay as the main medium of educational instruction. Two types of national schools, or schools fully funded by the government, were in existence at the time: Malay-medium schools, which were largely attended by the Malay community, and English-medium schools, which were popular among non-Malays, and aristocratic and urban Malays. Although enrolment in English-medium schools had grown steadily throughout the 1960s, the government instructed all such schools to phase out their use of English as the medium of instruction. The Cambridge

School Certificate and Higher School Certificate were replaced by Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), or Malaysian Certificate of Education, and Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM), or Malaysian Certificate of Higher Education, respectively. These were regulated by a governmental body and administered in Malay and, although English was retained as a core subject at both levels, a pass was not made compulsory for admission into local universities (David and Govindasamy 129). Additionally, emphasis was placed on a basic, functional grasp of the language, with the result that literary texts were not taught. Students were only compelled to read Shakespeare if they elected to sit the English Literature papers in their SPM or STPM examinations. By 1978, the process of conversion to this new education system was complete, and one could no longer count on the “‘sure attendance’ of Senior Cambridge students” at Shakespearean performances.

But MATG was clearly moved by patriotism rather than pragmatism. After all, students continued to sit the Cambridge examinations until a decade after MATG’s final Shakespearean production. Also, MATG’s subsequent productions could hardly be pronounced money-spinners: *Lela Mayang* (1968) purportedly reaped a meagre profit of RM10 (Fernando 177). Instead, the cessation of Shakespearean productions sprang from a crucial shift in the leadership and direction of MATG. Whereas non-expatriate members had previously been relegated to bit parts in productions, 1967 saw them coming to leadership for the very first time, when Syed Alwi became chairman and K. Das joined him on the committee. The group was renamed Malaysian Arts Theatre Group and set out to develop Malaysian theatre (Lo 52). This was followed by a stream of productions based on plays by Malaysian and – somewhat ironically, given the brief Japanese occupation of Malaya – Japanese writers. An exception was made in 1970 with an adaptation of E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (Rowland i-viii), its resonant anti-colonial sentiments presumably endearing it to MATG. Shakespeare was discarded, rejection of assumed British superiority translating into rejection of Britain’s main cultural export.

Other theatre groups continued to reassess the value and meaning of staging Shakespearean plays, variously rejecting and infusing them with local meanings and aesthetic forms. Amateur group Phoenix 61 staged *Macbeth* in 1974 and *Twelfth Night* in 1975, but by 1976 chose to turn away from Shakespeare and other figures of the Western canon in order to focus on English-medium plays from other post-colonial nations (Rowland 81-82). The team was helmed by Thor Kah Hoong, whose subsequent prodigious output of plays on Malaysian concerns established him as a key figure in the development of Malaysian theatre in English. In contrast to Phoenix 61’s brief flirtation with the Bard, Instant Café Theatre (ICT) has to date staged three Shakespearean plays over nine years: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1991), *Twelfth Night* (1995), and *The Merchant of Venice* (2000). The company’s engagement with Shakespeare may in fact be said to stretch further back, in that its four founding members, Jo Kukathas, Andrew Leci, Jit Murad and Zahim Albakri, acted together in a production of *Romeo and Juliet* (1989) by amateur group Liberal Arts Theatre. But ICT’s approach to Shakespeare reflects the company’s overarching interest in developing Malaysian political theatre. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* featured Malaysian traditional costumes and was produced in collaboration with Sutra Dance, a company with a strong emphasis on traditional Malay and Indian dance forms. Director Jo Kukathas saw the production as a valuable “reflect[ion] on [Malaysia’s] religious history, our Hindu Buddhist heritage ‘lost in the woods’ as it were, our more immediate and visible Malay-Muslim present with its increasing laws and hard and fast rules, our capitalist, pragmatic, messy present ... and perhaps future” (qtd. in McDonald). Performed in modern dress and set in Kuala Lumpur, ICT’s *The Merchant of Venice* presented Shylock as a member of the ethnic Chinese minority pitted against a crowd of *Melayu Baru*, urbane Malays who have benefitted from the economic privileges accorded to the Malay community under the controversial New Economic Policy. ICT thus harnessed Shakespeare to voice a bold critique of the Constitutionally-enshrined position of the Malays, a topic frequently deemed ‘sensitive’ and off-limits to public debate.

Other productions have used Shakespeare as a platform to showcase local and regional art forms. Sabera Shaik's *Urmi* (2007), an adaptation of *The Tempest*, featured Malay martial arts (*silat*) and shadow puppetry (*wayang kulit*) alongside Balinese and Indian dance forms. Chin San Sooi's *Macbeth* (2015) employed Chinese (Cantonese) Opera costumes albeit without the stylized movements and heavy makeup of the genre. This was restaged in 2016 with a slightly different cast, full operatic makeup, and preliminary performances of two traditional operas played by cast members, thereby firmly turning the spotlight on its Asian aesthetic. In these instances, Shakespearean language takes a backseat to the novelty of seeing Shakespeare in Asian dress. Whereas *Urmi* used a modern English translation of *The Tempest* (Adidharma), Chin's actors repeatedly garbled their Elizabethan lines (Kok; Tariq).

Pedagogical performances have also reflected the need to negotiate the cultural freight of the Bard. Housed in the Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya's Literary and Dramatic Society (LIDRA) partook in the nationalist movement away from Shakespeare and other canonical writers of the Anglo-American tradition. In the 1970s and 1980s, it staged more local drama, including a range of Malay- and English-language works in *Through Malaysian Eyes - Festival of Malaysian Plays* (1978). In the 1990s and 2000s, however, students of the National Academy of Art, founded in 1994 by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture Malaysia, staged a string of Shakespearean productions to promote traditional Malay theatrical forms (Abdullah, "Politics and Economics" 176-77). Although performed in the Malay language, thereby standing outside of the scope of this paper, these merit mention because the dates and artistic visions of the productions coincide with ICT's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1991) and Shaik's *Urmi* (2007). More important, these appear to have influenced later English-language campus productions. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2013) by Universiti Malaya's Faculty of Education was set in "Asian Athens," whereas Universiti Sains Malaysia's 2016 take on the same play incorporated *wayang kulit* and *silat*, traditional Malay forms of puppetry and martial arts, respectively (Abdullah "Politics and Economics" 177-82).

Despite this observable shift in approaches to Shakespeare, it would be wrong to assume a simple, linear development in Malaysian Shakespeare. Rather, a multiplicity of Shakespeares exists in postcolonial Malaysia much as it did in colonial Malaya. In the 1920s, Victoria Institution's *Twelfth Night* (1924) and *I Henry IV* (1925) were performed in appropriations of Elizabethan dress, but Malay College Kuala Kangsar's *Julius Caesar* (1925) was performed in local, Malay dress (Sidney 122-33; K. Johan 78). In 2005, three Shakespearean productions were staged to celebrate the opening of KLPAC: a Malay-language *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar* in Shakespearean English, and *Romi and Joo Lee dan lain lain*, an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* performed in Malaysian English, with song and dance sequences, and cameos by characters from other Shakespearean plays. Malaysia thus stands as proof positive of the difficulties involved in any attempt to track the evolution and current state of Asian Shakespeares. At least two such attempts have been made. James Brandon's "Some Shakespeare(s) in Some Asia(s)" identifies three strands, in part by their sources of cultural authority: the "canonical" which derives authority from their Shakespearean texts, the "localized" which is firmly grounded in local aesthetic forms and conceals its Shakespearean origins, and the "intercultural" which fuses local and Shakespearean sources of authority. Focused more on the reasons behind Asia's avid interaction with Shakespeare, Kennedy and Yong also propose three categories: "nationalist appropriation," "colonial instigation," and "intercultural revision" (7-10). But these enterprises are marked by repeated disavowals of the exhaustiveness of, and the clear distinctions between, their proposed categories.

The case of Malaysia suggests that this hesitancy is well-placed. Should we look at Kennedy and Yong's model, for example, a conundrum is posed by that fact that Shakespeare arrived on its shores through *bangsawan* theatre as well as through the colonial enterprise. Brandon's scaffolding is also unsatisfactory

when confronting Shaik's Balinese-infused *Urmi* and Chin's *Macbeth* in Cantonese opera costumes; although both productions were clearly intercultural, can either Balinese or Chinese art forms be considered local to Malaysia? A sampling of the performances which contributed to the year-long celebrations of the Bard in 2016 further highlights the complexities of categorising Malaysian Shakespeare. What does one do with *Plots of a Tyrant*, a *butoh* interpretation of *Richard III*? Does the element of *butoh* constitute a form of local aesthetics – "local" defined broadly to include all Asian countries – or the interaction of two colonial cultures, the Japanese and the British? And what of *Lo Mio and Chiu Liet: Forbidden Love in Forbidden City* and *Shakespeare goes Bollywood*, which transplanted the plots of *Romeo and Juliet* to feudal China and the Delhi Sultanate of North India, respectively? Do the Chinese and North Indian origins of a section of Malaysia's population mean that the plays' settings, costumes, and art forms are "indigenous"? Or are these more accurately a reflection of the current popularity of Chinese period drama and Bollywood movies among Malaysians of all ethnic origins due to globalisation?

Surveying the current state of scholarship on Asian Shakespeares, Lei notes that "[t]he more we look into the subject...the more we realize the inadequacy and limitations of existing conception, theory and methodology," among which is the postcolonial model of inquiry (2). Whereas extant studies of Malaysian Shakespeare have discussed pre-colonial *bangsawan* theatre, colonial-era productions in schools and colleges, and post-colonial appropriations in traditional Malay forms, the examples mentioned above reveal that other models are necessary if we are to begin examining the breadth of Malaysian Shakespeare. One possibility is suggested by an emerging trend in Shakespearean studies at large, in which "the language of the 'postcolonial' is replaced by the language of 'globalisation'" (Holderness and Loughrey 30). This is not to say that postcolonial theories can or should be dispensed with altogether. Malaysia clearly continues to grapple with its colonial legacy in many ways, and the extent to which globalisation is a post-colonial permutation of imperialism remains in dispute (Williams and Chrisman 2). But globalisation is radically altering the face of education in Malaysia, with far-reaching implications for local reception of the Bard. As I show, the exponential growth of international schools and private tertiary institutions is exposing a select, but growing, segment of young Malaysians to Shakespeare in a manner at once reminiscent of, and distinctly different from, the teaching of Shakespeare in schools from 1891 to 1977.

### **"To perform an act": *Shakespeare Demystified* and the Globalisation of Education in Malaysia**

English-medium education in British Malaya was designed primarily for members of the Malay ruling class, and meant to produce Anglophone and Westernized locals who would serve as administrators in the colonial machine, unlike their counterparts educated at the vernacular schools. But by the late 1960s, it catered to the middle class of all ethnicities, with up to 71% of all high school students enrolled in English-medium schools (Crouch 160). After the educational reforms of the 1960s and 70s, Malaysia retained a number of English-medium schools teaching curricula from other nations but with the different purpose of servicing the expatriate community. However, the Malaysian government in 2006 allowed international schools to admit Malaysian pupils, provided their number did not make up more than 40% of the student body. In 2012, even this cap was removed, and the number of international schools in Malaysia quickly more than doubled. According to official figures, only 57 international schools were in operation in 2010 when the government introduced its policy to promulgate the growth of such institutions. By 2012, 80 were in operation, with an additional 24 poised to open, and 13 more awaiting licences from the government ("Ramp Up"). Five years later, the number

of schools stood at 166, and 39,161 of its 61,156 students were Malaysian (Nasa and Pilay). Although these teach curricula from countries as varied as Australia, America, and India, British systems dominate the field in that a majority offer the Cambridge International Programme or the English National curriculum, or both.

Although this spread of British education may be read by some as an extension of imperialism, the main players behind this phenomenon are clearly seeking to better their positions in a global economy. The shift in the Malaysian government's policies is part of a strategy outlined in the Economic Transformation Programme to boost Malaysia's income by transforming it into an international hub for education, and the schools are owned and run by corporate entities. On the other hand, Malaysian parents who opt to send their children to international schools believe that an international curriculum, particularly a British one, will better equip their children with the critical thinking skills and fluency in English needed to succeed in a global age. Crucially, these are skills which the study of literature can hone. As of February 2017, eight international schools offered English Literature as an A-level option, and another eighteen offered the IGCSE English Literature paper. Additionally, recent modifications to the English National Curriculum have seen students aged 11 to 14 studying two complete Shakespearean plays instead of one, and promotional material for at least one school touts its curriculum's "greater exposure to English literature than the local KBSM syllabus" ("Curriculum"). Since Shakespeare remains an icon of English literature and literacy, these developments merit revaluations of the Bard's cultural significances.

Attendance at international schools is costly. Whereas education at national schools is free, Year 12 students in international schools in 2014 were charged between RM21,600 and RM111,088 per annum for tuition, exclusive of additional charges for the use of facilities and technological equipment. Non-refundable application fees went up to RM 1,000, with an additional registration fee of RM 32,000 for successful candidates ("Fees"; "High School Fees"). As a point of reference, the gross mean household income in Kuala Lumpur, the richest state, was RM 10,629 per month in 2014 or RM 127,548 for the whole year (Economic Planning Unit). In other words, Shakespeare is fast becoming the domain of an affluent elite, capable of purchasing knowledge of his works and of using it to their benefit. This is especially true because Shakespeare has been summarily dismissed from the Malaysian national curriculum. In 2000, the English Language subject was revised to include a literature component, in which students were required to read Shakespeare, albeit in a limited and somewhat bizarre form. Students in Secondary 4 and 5 read Sonnet 18, but 13-year-olds in Secondary 1 encountered a "poem" by Shakespeare, namely a portion of Macbeth's final soliloquy, given the title "Life's Brief Candle." But a review in 2010 saw Shakespeare excised from this component. Additionally, even SPM students taking the English Literature paper can now opt not to study the Bard. Citing the need for students to be fluent in English in order to be competitive global citizens, the government in May 2017 announced that up to three hundred students at national schools would be allowed to register for the IGCSE English Literature paper, the costs of which would be borne by the government. Among the stipulated texts is *Macbeth* (Ministry of Education). However, these students would be handpicked from a mere seven of the nation's 2,408 secondary-level schools ("Statistik").

The increase in private universities and colleges is also providing new avenues for financially-able youth to engage with Shakespeare. Similar to the case of international and national schools, these institutions charge higher tuition fees than the state-funded public universities, and place greater emphasis on English as a medium of instruction. These also often give a greater impression of participating in a global culture, in that many are locally-owned but offer pre-university or degree programmes through partnerships with universities in countries like America, England, and Australia, whereas a handful are branch campuses set up by English, Australian, and Chinese universities. Shakespearean performances are quickly becoming *de rigour* in these



campuses, frequently mounted by students hailing from a diverse range of disciplines, who engage with Shakespeare through community projects or elective introductory courses to literature and theatre. Symptomatic of students' sense of belonging to a global culture, these productions lack the valorisation of all things Asian manifested by their counterparts in public universities. Featuring modern paraphrases of Shakespeare's texts, UCSI University's *The Merchant of Venice* (2008), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2010), and *Julius Caesar* (2011) featured costumes which approximated the plays' original settings. Others productions turned Shakespeare's plays into Broadway-style musicals, including KDU College's *OMG* (2011) adapted from *The Taming of the Shrew*, and Taylor's University's *Macbeth – A Musical Theatre* (2015) and *Psyche-delic* (2016), an adaptation of *Twelfth Night* set in the 1970s. None of these effaced or self-consciously localized Shakespeare in the manner of Universiti Sains Malaysia's and Universiti Malaya's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Neither did they evince a sense of intimidation by the cultural elevation of Shakespeare, boldly paraphrasing the Elizabethan dialogue or casting it off altogether. An exception was *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2015) by students at the University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus, which recreated the rude mechanicals as a group of Malaysian labourers speaking Malaysian English while elsewhere retaining the play's original setting and much of its Shakespearean dialogue. But the relegation of Malaysian English to buffoonery denigrated the local vernacular and the national identity it represents, as much as it reflected a desire to Malaysianise the Bard. Shakespeare emerges in these productions as a form of cultural currency put on proud display, and the new geographical and temporal settings to which Shakespeare's works are transplanted further showcase the students' global identities. In other words, the globalisation of education in Malaysia is seeing the colonial freight of Shakespeare slowly being replaced by an association with economic affluence and global citizenship.

Catering primarily to students at schools and institutions of tertiary learning, *Shakespeare Demystified* has had its fortunes directly shaped by this shift in educational policies. English-language theatre in Malaysia struggles to be financially viable, hampered by a lack of state funding and by the popular notion that theatre is reserved for the elite. The Shakespeare brand does not fare any better, being all the more associated with foreign, colonial ideology and high culture. Attending a performance of *Urmi* in 2007, I found myself one of about a dozen audience members in an auditorium that can seat up to 1,412 persons. Ticket sales for a spectrum of Shakespeare-related shows in 2016 also indicate a general apathy towards all things Shakespearean. Less than fifty percent of available tickets were sold for TheatreThreeSixty's *Titus Andronicus*, a canonical rendering of the text directed by the award-winning Christopher Ling. Similar sales were recorded for the uproariously improvisational performances of *Much Ado About Nothing* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* staged at Petaling Jaya Live Arts Centre by Britain's The Handlebards. *Marble Hearts*, a radical rewriting of *Lear*, ran at a loss at KLPAC, as did a slick production of Joe Calarco's *Shakespeare's R+J* starring local actors. Most tellingly, Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra's musical tribute to the Bard played to a half-filled auditorium, whereas its *Musical Journey in Anime* was so popular that the number of shows was doubled from two to four. By contrast, *Shakespeare Demystified* shows at KLPAC started selling out two months before the commencement of its run in April. A second run in November at Theatre Lounge Café also saw shows selling out weeks beforehand, despite intervening performances at various educational institutions around Malaysia.<sup>1</sup>

Granted, the success of *Shakespeare Demystified* cannot be attributed solely to the educational emphasis on Shakespeare, forgetful of its artistic merit. Although sacrilegious to purists and unsatisfying for those craving uninterrupted Shakespeare, *Shakespeare Demystified* nonetheless works extremely well for its target audience. Performances are fast-paced and engaging, and I have observed students who arrived armed with their textbooks eventually putting them away in their enjoyment of the theatrical experience. Furthermore,

the series has gone from strength to strength since its inauguration. The workshop-style rehearsals popularised by Jeff Kevin and favoured by *Shakespeare Demystified*'s founding members have given way since 2015 to Lim Kien Lee's assuming the director's role, resulting in productions with a sharper artistic vision and greater thematic unity. Also significant is the progressively more professional nature of its cast. 2017, for example, saw significantly more polished performances from David H. Lim, in his fifth outing with *Shakespeare Demystified*, and Tung Jit Yang, who had gained a Bachelor of Fine Arts from New York University and a position as Director-in-Residence at KLPAC since his *Shakespeare Demystified* debut in 2013. Live music has increasingly been deployed to great effect, including the use of percussion for special effects in *Othello* and the actors' sobering acapella rendition of a Celtic lullaby after the murder of Macduff's family in *Macbeth*. Stage business has also become more sophisticated, from the carefully-choreographed fight scenes of *Macbeth*, to the uproarious flamenco routines by Arragon in 2016's *Merchant of Venice* in contrast to the simple hand gestures of the 2012 outing. *Macbeth* also saw attempts to draw participation from the audience, who were urged to cheer during the coronations of Macbeth and Malcolm.

But the impact of the growth of international schools and private colleges on *Shakespeare Demystified* cannot be denied. In 2011, KLSP debuted in KLPAC with a total of six shows. By 2013, it was playing also in the Penang Performing Arts Centre, and two more shows were added to the Kuala Lumpur leg because school groups continued to call the box office after the scheduled six shows were fully sold out. In 2014, it played in KLPAC in a space with almost double the seating capacity of that used in previous years; the house was almost full for every show but one, mostly with school-going audiences.<sup>2</sup> Recently, *Shakespeare Demystified* productions toured various international schools and private universities, adding more locations to their circuit each year: the outlying state of Perak in 2015, the southern state of Johor in 2016, and the Bornean state of Sarawak in 2017. In 2016, ticket sales for performances at various schools outnumbered those at public theatres, 2800 to 2301.

Founding member Lim Soon Heng is frank about the economic advantages of *Shakespeare Demystified*'s pedagogical slant. Confessing a desire to be involved in meatier and more intellectually sophisticated productions, he notes that "trying to do schools sometimes is not very satisfying. But to be sustainable...at the end of the day, to do what the schools can take is a way of creating a business out of a person" (Lim and Lim). And the series has indeed evolved into a business venture; in 2014, Lim Kien Lee, a business graduate, left a ten-year career with the Italian Trade Commission to focus on Kuala Lumpur Shakespeare Players (KLSP), a sole proprietorship which now manages *Shakespeare Demystified*. KLSP also receives payment to conduct workshops on a range of Shakespeare-related matters; whereas some impel international school students to discover the nuances of exam texts through role-play and scansion, others see university students with a mere smattering of English learning about posture and voice projection while speaking Shakespearean lines. Source texts for *Shakespeare Demystified* further reflect a keen awareness of the market created by international schools. Whereas the early years saw plays selected for reasons as simple as the desire to attempt comedy (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 2013), productions from 2015 to 2017 have catered specifically to the requirements of the Cambridge IGCSE and A Level curriculum, including the restaging of *The Merchant of Venice* in 2016. Tellingly, whereas *Julius Caesar* was chosen in 2011 because it was an option for SPM English Literature candidates, the national curriculum has since featured little in the direction of the series.

The uniqueness of *Shakespeare Demystified*'s financial viability cannot be overstated. As Abdullah has shown, even pedagogical Shakespeare has typically struggled on this front. Victoria Institution's touring production failed to cover its costs, despite the large turnout at multiple locations. Public universities have also

been hampered by economic considerations, resulting in an absence of productions or in productions which have their artistic visions curtailed by the need to abide by the agenda of their sponsors (“Politics and Economics”). Where sponsors have come forward, KLSP has made concerted efforts to reach out to other audiences, motivated by the belief that Shakespeare is for all. Actors travelled to rural schools to perform excerpts from their productions when non-profit organisations covered the costs of travel and accommodation, and national school students were prioritized when a corporate sponsor purchased tickets and asked KLSP to give these away. But the need for funding to make possible these occasions is a reminder of the simple fact that theatre and economics are all too often inseparable. Indeed, those who balk at KLSP’s apparent commodification of Shakespeare would do well to remember that early modern theatre was an industry, and Shakespeare himself an astute entrepreneur who profited from his commercial ventures.

Neither can *Shakespeare Demystified* be dismissed as child’s play undeserving of scholarly attention, in that much of Shakespeare’s enduring cultural value owes to the very business entities which harness the Shakespeare brand for their own gains, but thereby keep him alive in our cultural consciousness and uphold the value of his legacy (Bristol 88-120). More important, KLSP and *Shakespeare Demystified* are in the position not only to promulgate the value of Shakespeare but also to shape the attitudes with which Malaysians approach him. As McLuskie and Rumbold point out, “commercial organisations do not simply borrow value from Shakespeare and trade profitably on his name, but also ‘co-produce’ new kinds of meaning and value for Shakespeare in the market” (213). A confluence of factors heightens the potential impact of *Shakespeare Demystified* on Malaysian receptions of the Bard: the responsiveness of young minds to new ideas, the power of staged performances over printed texts in a visual generation, and the influence over Malaysian culture and policies which will eventually be exerted by their now-youthful audiences when they become adults. Furthermore, given the paucity of Shakespearean performances in Malaysia, *Shakespeare Demystified* might well constitute the first, or only, live Shakespeare experienced by their audiences.

What then is the cultural freight with which *Shakespeare Demystified* invests the Bard? Productions are very much “canonical,” to borrow Brandon’s phrase, in that performances reflect a markedly reverential attitude towards Shakespearean texts. Minimal sets and costumes ensure that visual elements do not detract from the dialogue and, although texts are regularly abridged, care is taken to retain the best-known scenes and speeches of each play. Nor does the interpolation of original material detract from the authority of the original text. Instead, commentaries often serve to illuminate Shakespearean wordplay and explore possible interpretations of lines. For example, *Hamlet: A Performance Lecture* (2014) was equal parts dramatisation and discussion of the text, with soliloquies plucked out of their scenes, recited and then subjected to lengthy analyses informed by etymology and early modern contexts.

Additionally, productions have thus far abstained from deploying Asian costumes or theatrical forms, choosing instead to set plays in a vaguely Western milieu. *Hamlet: A Performance-Lecture* saw characters uniformly dressed in black and differentiated by select items, such as a trench coat for Hamlet and a crown each for Claudius and Gertrude. By contrast, trench coats are alien to the sweltering tropics, and Malaysian royalty wear traditional Malay garb and the *tengkolok*, a headdress made of embroidered brocade. Similarly, invocative of Western dress, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* saw actors in skirts and blouses, or shirts and slacks. Only once has the local intruded on Shakespeare’s Western worlds; in *Hamlet: A Performance Lecture*, the gravedigger, dressed in a bright yellow safety helmet and a luminous waistcoat, called to mind the local Road Works Department, a constant butt of humour for its bright-vested employees digging holes in newly-tarred roads. The semblance may have been unintentional, since it was not verbally referenced. At any rate, such localisation has not since reappeared.

Productions also avoid topical commentary, focusing instead on broadly universal themes. In *The Merchant of Venice* (2012), posters in the foyer and explicatory comments during the performance grounded the play in its historical contexts. This ensured that Shakespeare stood out for his “humanist” values, but side-stepped parallels between the persecution of the Jew and the marginalization of specific ethnic and religious groups in contemporary Malaysia. In 2015, *Othello*, like all the other characters but one, was played by an actor of Chinese descent, his difference signaled by his black garb and heavy makeup. Audience members who asked why the production had not cast an actor with a darker complexion, or addressed the racism latent in Malaysian life, were told that the production wanted to move beyond religious and ethnic identities to highlight the issue of social differences in any form. As such, *Shakespeare Demystified* refuses to use Shakespeare as a platform to showcase local theatrical forms or to comment on local issues or events.

*Shakespeare Demystified*'s insistence on Shakespeare's universality runs the danger of normalising the worldview of a Caucasian man, as much as its glorification of his words smacks of Anglophilia. Furthermore, in many ways, *Shakespeare Demystified* resembles its colonial predecessors like the Victoria Institution productions spearheaded by Richard Sidney. Both resist the localization of Shakespearean plays enacted by contemporaneous productions, be it Malay College Kuala Kangsar's *Julius Caesar* or Universiti Sains Malaysia's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Chin's *Macbeth*. Both cater primarily to students receiving a “highly commodified” (Leow 250) British-based curriculum, tailoring productions to syllabus requirements and touring various towns with high numbers of students. Indeed, KLSP's dictum that “Shakespeare was originally written not to be studied by geeks or seen by snobs, but to be performed for the general masses” (“About Us”) echoes the programme for Victoria Institution's touring production, which argues that “[p]lays are written...to be played on a stage before an audience. Not to be read in books. Not to be studied in Schools” (qtd. in Sidney 132). But it is *Shakespeare Demystified*'s approach to local speech and thought which clearly reveals its distance from colonial ideology.

Malaysian speakers of English present a wide array of accents, shaped by the range of Englishes and other dialects or languages to which the speaker has been exposed. These accents are fraught with meaning within an elaborate network of social prejudices, and some speakers affect British or American inflections in an attempt to appear more cultured, educated or affluent. *Shakespeare Demystified* actors have roundly resisted this impulse. Although their commitment to scanning every one of their lines establishes a degree of regularity in their delivery and ensures the Shakespearean lines are understood, each retains his or her natural accent in performances. Since members are frequently of various ethnic and educational backgrounds, no two speak with the same inflection, resulting in productions which always sound undeniably and unapologetically Malaysian.

The significance of this must not be underestimated. Discussing the capacity for post-colonial subjects to speak back to their colonizers within the cultural framework the latter bequeathed them, Loomba and Orkin ask provocatively, “in what voices do the colonized speak – their own, or in accents borrowed from their masters?” Here, of course, “accents” is a metaphor for the ways and means utilised, as evident in the subsequent statement that “[c]olonial masters imposed their value system through Shakespeare, and in response colonized peoples often answered back in Shakespearean accents” (7). But the question is equally important should “accents” be understood literally as the inflections and stress patterns of speech. Kenneth Branagh, arguably the twentieth-century's most successful proponent of chipping away at the high-culture associations of Shakespeare, spells out his approach to “produc[ing] a Shakespeare film that belonged to the world” such as *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993): “Different accents, different looks.... I explained [to actors] that I did not want artificial ‘Shakespeare voices,’ that they must perform in their own accents, and that they

must be prepared to study the text technically” (x). Crucially, his insistence on both colour-blind and tone-deaf casting has been traced at least in part to his own experience with colonialism, the Irish subject insistently inserting representations of Otherness into his films in order to dispel the prejudices traditionally held against them. Though some of Branagh’s movies inadvertently introduce subtexts which seem to reinforce Otherness (Lehmann), his persistent casting of American actors and his openness to the regional accents of Britain reveal the importance of natural accents in allowing actors and audiences to put aside Shakespeare’s associations with British high culture.

*Shakespeare Demystified*, too, has not been without the occasional stumble. In 2012’s *Merchant of Venice*, Morocco was played for laughs through an accent which heavily resembled that of Malaysian-Indians who, like the “tawny Moor”, are often ridiculed for their complexions. But the 2016 instalment revealed an awareness of this slip-up, comic effect produced instead through robust physical humour. Also, casting does not privilege the degrees of sophistication typically associated with different accents. In 2017, for example, Lim Soon Heng played Macbeth with a distinctly Chinese accent, whereas Tika Mu’tamir’s British-inflected tones served to flesh out Macduff’s young son. Additionally, expositions on Shakespeare’s texts are as likely to feature familiar expressions from Malaysian English as to discuss the etymology and meanings of Elizabethan words. In 2015’s *Othello*, for example, audiences discovered that “Moor” was an ambiguous referent in Shakespeare’s time for geographical origins, and ethnic and religious identities. But they were also asked to consider if Cassio were “kiasu”; a Hokkien word literally meaning “afraid to lose” and adopted by Malaysians to describe a mean and competitive spirit. In all productions, explanations have periodically been infused with “lah,” a typically Malaysian suffix which serves as an intensifier. These moments are not derisive of Malaysian English; rather, preliminary phrases like “as we Malaysians say” and “as we would say in Malaysia” validate a sense of national identity and solidarity expressed through familiarity with the local vernacular. At the same time, attention is given to Shakespearean bawdry, such as the reference to female genitalia underlying Hamlet’s reference to “country matters.” Together, these dismantle the notion that Shakespearean language and the English culture it represents are the epitome of sophistication and elegance.

But perhaps most important in shaping local attitudes to the Bard is the way *Shakespeare Demystified* encourages audiences to interact with Shakespeare on their own terms rather than to be cowed by this icon of Englishness. During the Brechtian expositions, audiences are frequently presented with open-ended questions or exposed to multiple, even contradictory, interpretations within the scholarly tradition and encouraged to form their own opinions. In the question-and-answer sessions, no query is dismissed as too trivial, and cast members often direct the questions back to the audience, listening respectfully to their thoughts, before affirming the value of these. It is an egalitarian approach which ensures that Shakespeare does not become universal because all learn to embrace the values attributed to Shakespeare, but because each person claims an equal right to use Shakespeare as a tool to think and to express his or her perspective. Shakespeare thus ceases to be a gentleman’s club to which one gains admission after accruing the necessary badges of sophistication, but a public playground in which all are welcome to play with the apparatus of their choice. And the comments reveal that the team’s refusal to pinpoint parallels between Shakespearean texts and local contexts has in no way hindered audiences from making those connections. At a performance of *Othello*, for example, these addressed matters as varied as racism, wife battery, and corruption, each illustrated with specific examples from Malaysian life. If, as Holderness and Loughrey suggest, Shakespeare is ultimately of value as a tool of global communication, through which different voices can be heard and understood, *Shakespeare Demystified* is helping its audiences to see Shakespeare in just that light.

**“In your and my discharge”: Conclusion**

KLSP’s influence on the Malaysian theatre scene is already being felt. Having established itself as a local authority on Shakespeare, it has since shaped the output of other groups, cultivating an environment in which Shakespearean verse is delivered with an understanding of its internal rhythms and textual interpretations are informed by scholarly research. It offers free training to actors interested in refining their skills, with the aim of expanding the current pool of talent equipped to handle the Bard. It has also been involved directly in productions spearheaded by other groups. Christopher Ling’s exciting adaptation of the seldom-performed *Titus* was in fact a collaboration between TheatreThreeSixty, which he helms, and KLSP; actors involved in *Shakespeare Demystified* that year were cast in several roles, and Lim Kien Lee served also as dramaturg. Lim’s academic expertise and acting skills were also called upon for *Shakespeare Meets Butoh*, and various *Shakespeare Demystified* actors narrated and acted out scenes in Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra’s concert to celebrate the Bard.

But the real impact of KLSP remains to be seen. Lim Kien Lee projects that *Shakespeare Demystified* is “creating an audience” so that there will one day be many Malaysians eager to see Shakespearean texts performed in their entirety (Lim and Lim). The prospect is exciting, in that an environment in which Shakespearean productions are financially viable should encourage regular performances of plays, and allow practitioners to pursue their artistic visions unhampered by the demands of sponsors. But this overlooks the point that *Shakespeare Demystified*’s audiences could also become purveyors, and not just consumers, of Shakespeare in Malaysia. Tellingly, every year sees young audiences raising questions regarding the staging of Shakespearean plays, suggesting an interest to move beyond textual engagement. And although the percentage of Malaysian students enrolled in international schools remains small, namely one percent of primary school students and four percent at secondary level (Nasa and Pilay), this minority may one day transform Malaysian Shakespeare.

*Jarum Halus* (2008), an award-winning film adaptation of *Othello*, which addresses local prejudices surrounding race, religion, and sexuality, was directed by then-23-year-old Malaysian Mark Tan, who speaks of having fallen in love with the play when he was exposed to it at school (R. Johan). Educated in Garden International School, one of the nation’s most elite international schools, and at Warwick University in the UK, Tan hails from a period when the exponential growth of institutions supplying international curricula in Malaysia had not yet taken place and *Shakespeare Demystified* had not yet been founded. Separately, *Gedebe* (2002), a Malay film adaptation of *Julius Caesar* directed by Nam Ron, has drawn international interest for its capacity to build on its Shakespearean source and its Kuala Lumpur setting to comment on the ousting and imprisonment of former-deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim (Burnett 145). Like Tan, Nam Ron encountered Shakespeare in the course of his study, albeit at the National Academy of Art. Though filmed in different languages and directed by youth hailing from completely different systems of education, these movies suggest that formally exposing Malaysian youth to Shakespeare may well give birth to a unique, distinctly Malaysian take on Shakespeare. The varieties of innovative campus productions discussed above only serve to strengthen this impression.

It is admittedly too early to project the future of Malaysian Shakespeare, but the current globalisation of education is clearly opening more eyes to the intricacies of Shakespeare. Thus, a new phase of Malaysian Shakespeare may be on the horizon, one which *Shakespeare Demystified* could be already nurturing through

its engagement with Malaysian youth. As Antonio notes after surviving the storms cast by the lordly Prospero, the past is but a prologue to that which can potentially be performed.

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Despite the overhaul of MATG, Shakespeare continued to be staged under the aegis of the British Council, which flew in London’s New Shakespeare Company for a performance of *The Tempest* in 1964 (Davies), and worked alongside British expatriate Donald Davies to produce *Othello* (1975) and *As You Like It* (1977) (Rowland ix-x).

<sup>3</sup> My thanks to the box office staff at Damansara Performing Arts Centre, Petaling Jaya Live Arts Centre, and Dewan Filharmonik Petronas, and to Lim Kien Lee for providing these figures. Thanks also to Renukha Devi for her assistance in gathering this information. Information on *Marble Hearts* and *Shakespeare’s R+J* obtained from the blog of Faridah Merican.

<sup>4</sup> Opening night, a school night, saw only eleven audience members in a house able to seat 160. But a total of 662 tickets were sold for the KLPAC run, thus an average of 130 people attended each of the other performances. By comparison, a musical comedy staged in the same space immediately after KLSP’s run saw an average of a hundred per night, whereas a Chinese-language production performed just before saw a mere 66 persons per night. My thanks to box office staff at KLPAC for these figures.

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