

CLASSICAL BINGLISH IN THE 21ST CENTURY

When I wrote this essay two decades ago, I was about to start work on *Midsummer Night's Dream*; two decades on and across two centuries, I have directed *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Tempest*, *Romeo & Juliet* and *Macbeth*.

In my essay, I had noted how the demonization of the Other is one of the propelling impulses of inter-culturalism. I could as well say it is the propellant of most of Shakespeare's plays. In each of these productions, I found myself encountering the Other: Shylock, obviously, as a Jew in a Christian state; Prospero, exiled from his home; Romeo and Juliet, both as Other to each other because of their warring families and Other by dint of their love; and Macbeth who willingly steps into being a gruesome Other. In an era when, post-9/11, the terrorist Other has risen to prominence globally at the same time as migration has become a deeply contested issue, this context goes some way towards explaining my increasing focus on Shakespeare as the site for cross-cultural *Binglish*.

(Let me here clarify that I used the terms 'inter-culturalism' and 'cross-cultural' very loosely in this essay, understanding by their use the more resonant and contested 'multiculturalism'. It seems to me we are still wrestling to find the appropriate term to define one of the most significant human challenges facing all advanced economies today – how to create 'national' sensibilities out of a diversity of 'nation-hoods' defined by race, faith, language, gender and class.)

I considered in my essay that confronting the Other was a vital component of the *Binglish* approach to classics, precisely because it is inherently inclusive of the diversity of nation-hoods that now make all modern societies - composed as they are of race, faith, gender and class disparities.

In the two decades since this essay was written, the disparities in British society have increased. In part, this is a response to the severe economic downturn occasioned by the collapse of financial systems in the West since 2007. Immigration and terrorism, however, have served to make the disparities more visceral. This has led to a seeming contradiction, at least in theatre. While on the one hand the last two decades have seen many more Black and Asian works being presented on our stages – with increasing numbers of actors and writers gaining expressive opportunities – they have also exposed more glaring inequalities of opportunity.

Our theatres remain predominantly White-led: at the time of writing, there are only 5 non-White led theatre buildings in Britain (including my own) out of more than 1,400 theatre buildings. This amounts to less than 0.4% of our theatre infrastructure, at a time when the Black and Asian population of Britain is around 12%. And these figures do not tell the whole story. Black and Asian populations are concentrated in major British towns and cities – in Leicester, they form the majority population, yet none of its theatres are non-White led. In London, whose Black and Asian population is around 40% and where 4 out

of the 5 non-White led theatres are based, the proportion is slightly higher – 1.6% of the 250-odd London theatre buildings.

Structural disparities such as these have led to concerted campaigns for change. It remains to be seen how successful these are. At the heart of campaigns for change is the impulse to be part of the whole range of modern theatre and theatre-making – which, paradoxically, brings us back to the classics in general and Shakespeare in particular.

It has long been a truism, in Britain at least, that no actor's credentials are complete without some experience of the classics. For Black and Asian actors, this is particularly so – and where the 'Black ceiling' is most evident. Producers continue to make the assumption that Black and Asian actors are unsuitable or incapable of working on the classics; and, conversely, many Black and Asian actors find the classics alienating.

For me, theatre exists in the interplay between tradition and modernity. The new Others in British society – Blacks and Asians and other immigrant minorities – have to engage in this interplay if there is to be a lasting imaginative change in British society. Specifically, that means Bilingualising Shakespeare.

Imperial Britain "universalised" Shakespeare. In his (in)famous *Minute on Education* in 1835 Thomas Babington Macaulay, arguing for the introduction of English education in British India against the so-called Orientalists who preferred to continue education in local languages, definitively articulated the imperial impulse: "I am quite ready to take the oriental learning at the valuation of the orientalist themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia."¹

This extraordinary judgement, put into practice throughout the British Empire, provides an historical context for *Bilingual*, or *Other*, approaches to the classics. Caliban's accusation to Prospero – "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is I know how to curse" – takes on a complex poignancy. On one level, yes, the colonised has learnt how to abuse the coloniser. On another, he/she has learnt also the language of resistance. After all, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mandela turned "English" values of freedom, equality, justice, back on their oppressors to win political and social freedoms.

Faced with the twin, and at times related, challenges of Terror and Immigration, it seems to me that Bilingualising the classics in theatre offers hope for achieving freedoms of the imagination – sparking both our own and our audiences minds and hearts into an appreciation of *Other* sensibilities. It is precisely this negotiation which I have now enshrined in the fabric of our new theatre, reconstructed to architecturally display a dialogue between the 19th and 21st centuries, between Britain and India. The reconstructed Tara Theatre, opening early next year, is designed to become a crucible for Bilingualising the classics. A tree inscribed across the new façade of the theatre

is suggestive of the Shakespearean bower within, where the stage is an Indian earth floor and the theatre roof sprouts a green garden!

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Notes:

1. Bureau of Education. Selections from Educational Records, Part I (1781-1839). Edited by H. Sharp. Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1920. Reprint. Delhi: National Archives of India, 1965, 107-117