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Shakespeare Adaptation across Borders:

A CONVERSATION WITH MONA ZAIDI

*"O, no, my dream was lengthen'd after life;
O, then began the tempest to my soul,
Who pass'd, methought, the melancholy flood,
With that grim ferryman which poets write of,
Unto the kingdom of perpetual night."*

(*Richard III* [Act 1 sc iv])

BY RACHEL OFFER

In Act I, scene iv of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Duke Clarence tells his prison guard of a horrid nightmare he has experienced, recounting all of the terrible sights he beheld. The imagery in this scene is some of the strongest in the play, and Toronto-based filmmaker Mona Zaidi takes advantage of it in her 2017 short, *Richard III: Unto the Kingdom of Perpetual Night*. Applying the text to images depicting the current refugee crisis, the film magnifies a small moment from an epic play in order to create powerful resonances for a contemporary audience. *Unto the Kingdom of Perpetual Night* was named Best Film at last year's prestigious Shakespeare Shorts Competition, organized by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-upon-Avon. It was selected from 235 entries submitted from countries around the globe, including New Zealand, Iran, and Romania. Zaidi is the first Canadian to receive the award.

The theme of the 2017 competition was "Crossing Borders," and Zaidi's film uses visuals that cross borders of time and

country to bring the imagery in the text to life. Zaidi takes an often-overlooked scene from a play that centres heavily on war and destruction and stretches the text across centuries to suggest its application to experiences in our world today. Within the time constraints of the short film format, Zaidi layers and juxtaposes images such as boats, water, and war in order to pull the viewer into the fantastical world of Clarence's dreams. The images emphasize the pace, style, and poetic rhythm of the text and create an immersive experience of Shakespeare's language. Sir Kenneth Branagh, who adjudicated the competition, said of Zaidi's film, "This was a powerfully felt, cinematically ambitious exploration of nightmare—personal and global . . . Shakespeare as prophet was met with prescient image making of the self-destruction of which man is capable, in imagination and action."¹

I spoke to Zaidi over the phone just after her return to Canada upon receiving her award.

Above: Still from *Richard III: Unto the Kingdom of Perpetual Night*. (Photo by Mark Mainguy.)

Page 25: Filmmaker Mona Zaidi. (Photo by Mark Mainguy.)

"Really, what's incredible about some of these classical texts, Shakespeare in particular, is that he had an almost prescient sense of this epic cycle of human war and destruction and displacement. When Clarence describes his vision, I thought, 'Wow this could literally be talking about today.'"

R: How significant is it for you to be the first Canadian to win this award?

M: Oh, wow. Well, in Canada we have quite an amazing history with Shakespeare. Actually, I think Voltaire famously once said that "Shakespeare is a drunken barbarian, popular only in places like London and Canada." [Laughs] So we have an incredible tradition here of doing Shakespeare, but not too much in cinema. I feel really honoured and proud to be able to take some of the tremendous history that we've had in Canada of performing Shakespeare but to add a new twist to it; so being the first Canadian filmmaker to receive this award is very meaningful.

R: I watched the film, and it was quite wonderful to see the text brought to life cinematically.

M: Thank you. That's one of the things that I was most interested in, because as a filmmaker, taking some of these classical texts, one always has the challenge of "How am I going to communicate this four-hundred-year-old text to a modern audience? How am I going to bridge the language barrier, even the cultural barrier, so that the profoundly resonant truths that are being explored in some of these things can come to life for a person who talks in a modern language and is accustomed to certain types of storytelling?" With this particular work, I was really struck by this nightmarish, apocalyptic vision that the Duke has. Really, what's incredible about some of these classical texts, Shakespeare in particular, is that he had an almost prescient sense of this epic cycle of human war and destruction and displacement. When Clarence describes his vision, I thought, "Wow this could literally be talking about today." But because of the unique techniques that you can use in film, I'm able to do that without distracting too much from the original text: you can still hear what he's saying but you get this double layer of it, by being able to see almost time compressed so that past and present are intermingled. I thought that it would be a very interesting, fresh way to do a modern adaptation, so in some ways they're still in their costumes, they're still in the intended period of the piece, and yet behind them through this dream sequence, we're

able to see just across the span of human history, this endless cycle of war and destruction, displacement and suffering, that is just as true today as it was in Shakespeare's time, and certainly long before his time. It was exciting to be able to contribute something new to a tradition that has certainly had such a long and significant history. It's not every day that you get to put a new twist on Shakespeare.

R: You talked a bit about the text that you chose, but what was your selection process? Did you start with the idea of war and refugees and look for text that fit that, or were you reading the scene when that came to you?

M: It came about when exploring the competition theme of "Crossing Borders." It's difficult to say whether the text came first. This particular scene had captivated me for quite some time because, for me, it captures this idea of crossing borders in both the literal sense of migrants and immigrants—with that amazing image Clarence has of "a thousand fearful wracks/ A thousand men that fishes gnawed upon"—but also in a more poetic sense, the sense of that liminal space between life and death, between dreaming and waking, these borders that we're constantly flirting with in our daily existence. This was really my line of inquiry as an artist, this idea of crossing borders. That prompted me to look at this scene in a way where I was asking, "How do I create almost a precipice that the viewer stands at, where we are neither awake nor asleep nor alive nor dead? We're all almost migrants in a sense, and we've lost sight of the shore behind us, the safety of the home we've left behind, and the new shore hasn't really appeared in front of us yet, we're adrift." It's not a very well-known scene in Shakespeare, but for me, it just had this magical quality of multilayered meaning. And for me that liminal space is one of the most fascinating to explore as an artist, if you can take the viewer or if you can take your reader to that edge where they've left behind the material existence that they're usually functioning in. If you take them into this, you've essentially drawn a magic circle on the ground and said, "Come in here, the rules of the normal world don't apply, now you're in the world of the story."

More generally, this film is the first in a series I'm doing based on



classical texts from world literature. So the idea behind the project was to take moments from some of the really great works of human history from around the world and just distill a single moment from them and explore the larger questions of human existence. Sometimes when you take an entire work, some of the subtle nuances of the meaning get lost because there's just this epic story behind it, so I thought as a filmmaker it's kind of interesting to explore just a single theme in a single moment from some of these really great works. The short film format is kind of perfect for that sort of narrow exploration, just taking a moment, just a taste of what this thing could be.

R: Adaptation is debated between purists, who don't think that Shakespeare's plays should be taken out of their original context, and post-colonial critics, who suggest that assuming Shakespeare's texts are universal glosses over classist, sexist, racist aspects of the plays that ignore the experiences and stories of marginalized peoples. What is your response to these ideas?

M: That's a really interesting question, and I think it's a really timely one. The way I look at the story is that there's the plot, and the plot is what works on your conscious mind, and then underneath that plot is the story. And the story transcends time and culture and place, and the story speaks directly to that within us which is part of the shared inheritance of humanity, the shared existence. So for me, when I look at some of the great works of Shakespeare, certainly in terms of the plot, culture has changed, and times have changed, and the specifics are no longer relevant or meaningful to us. But if you look underneath it, the archetypal stories that are being told are the same, as they have been for all time. That underneath part is the part I'm interested in exploring in adaptation. As far as I can see, if you are true to the underlying archetypal story, you're always on sure ground. Because in many ways that's what Shakespeare was doing too—he was really doing a modernization of some very ancient stories going back to Greek times and before.

In terms of gender and colonialism, those are two significant issues. And I think that every artist has to ask themselves how they're going to remain mindful and sensitive to those issues. I can only say that the way I approach my work is to say, "Alright, let's look at what was the story underneath these plots. What was he really talking about when he was talking about these things? What was the metaphor? What was the poetic analogy that was being made?" Even though the specifics of how he did it may not be culturally appropriate in this time and place, it is what was underneath it that made it such a resonant and significant story for the time.

It's a complicated issue. You know, I'm a woman and my family comes from India, so I'm not a member of the boy's club for sure. But at the same time, India has a very rich mythological tradition, but it's a polytheistic tradition. There is an allowance

made in India, at least theoretically, for everyone to worship their own deity in their own manner. Having that background maybe gives me a certain perspective of being able to make space for a wide variety of things. It's comfortable for me to make space for everyone to exist in their own way. So for me as an artist I have to follow my own artistic path and try my best to integrate the past but stay mindful of the issues. And it's a constant question I think that every artist, every woman artist, is constantly up against. When you look at the traditional classics, they're all written by men, the protagonists are primarily men, and it's a question. However, I'm very mindful that with moving into a time where women are making their voices heard, I don't want to lose some of those incredibly beautiful and significant stories that lie underneath those classic texts. The fact that it was written by a man doesn't really matter to me; the significant thing is the humanity in those stories.

R: You've described your work as influenced by "ancient artistic and spiritual traditions of India." How does that translate to your work on this film specifically?

M: In this particular project, I would say that the influence is probably more generally in terms of an approach. And also, well, in some ways every work you do is autobiographical. In this one for example, that ending monologue that the guard speaks, I took it from a very different part of the play, I took a bit of liberty and I took a different character's speech and put it at the end because I felt that really underlined what I wanted to say about the piece. And the perspective I think is probably a uniquely Vedic perspective in some ways, which is neither to judge one way or the other, but simply to recognize the particular cycle that we're in. As Third Citizen says "Before the days of change, still is it so. By a divine instinct, men's minds mistrust Ensuing dangers." So that is to say that here we enter a particular cycle of the human story, and it's not a unique cycle, this is the way it is; in times of change men's hearts are full of fear and you cannot reason with people in this time. But without saying particularly that this is wrong or that is wrong: simply to recognize that humans go through cycles, human history is a circular history. A particularly Vedic perspective is of time being cyclical and circular as opposed to a straight line. I think that that vantage point—the Eastern vantage point—permeates everything that I do. The idea of polytheism and the idea of cyclical time are two fundamental perspectives on existence that then inform everything that you do, without you realizing it really. If you have a sense of time where there is a beginning and then an end, this gives you a particular approach. There's a particular, shall we say, anxiety in the work as the end is getting near. As opposed to in the Eastern approach, where a certain perspective suggests, "Well, this is the cycle that we're in, this is the cycle that has happened many times before, this is what happens when this cycle is in place." It's a particular way of looking at things.

R: *Do you think maybe that's why you're drawn to these types of stories?*

M: Absolutely. When I was very young I was really interested not so much in the plot, but in the insides. I was interested in philosophical work. I was interested in the Upanishads and the Tao Te Ching, and those were the things that I found fascinating. The internal journey has always been the one that fascinated me.

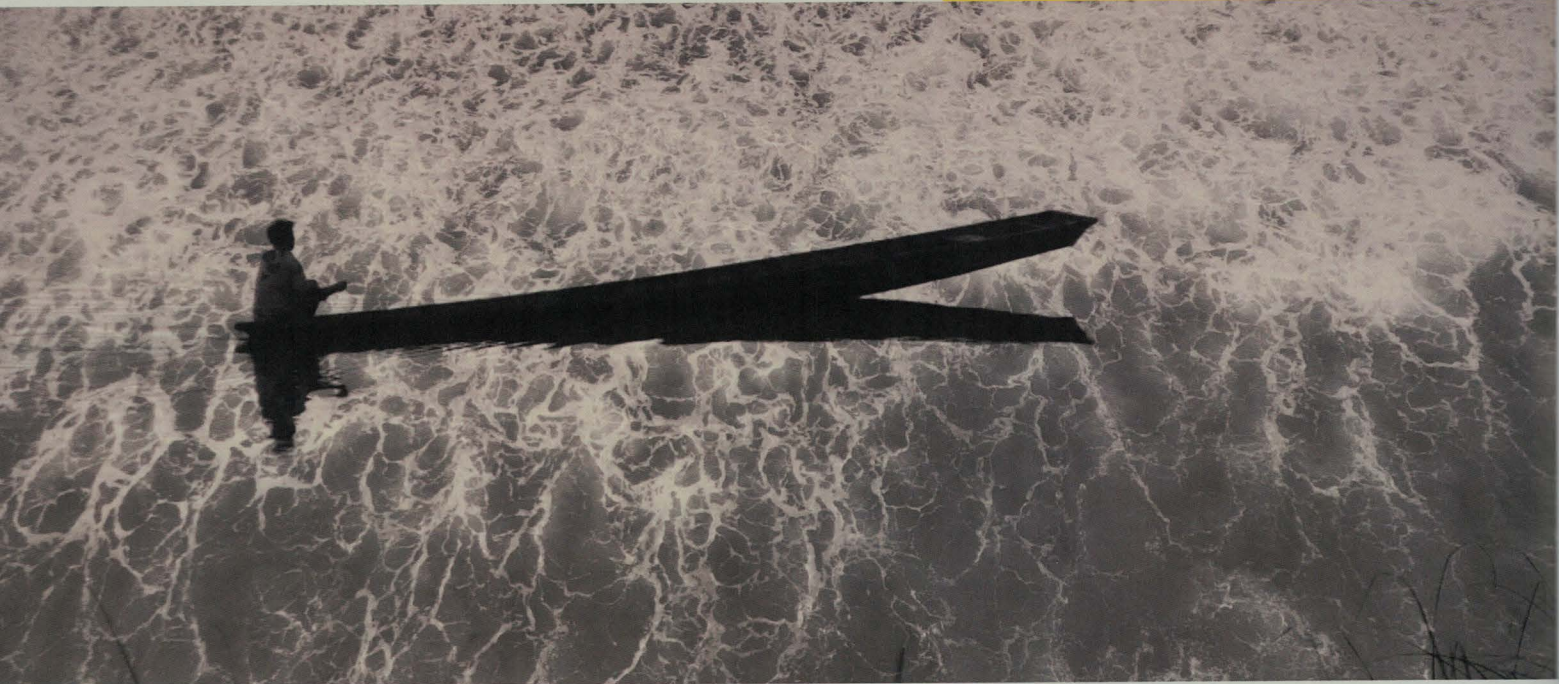
"How do I create almost a precipice that the viewer stands at where we are neither awake nor asleep nor alive nor dead? We're all almost migrants in a sense and we've lost sight of the shore behind us, the safety of the home we've left behind, and the new shore hasn't really appeared in front of us yet, we're adrift."



Stills from *Richard III: Unto the Kingdom of Perpetual Night*. (Photo by Mark Mainguy.)

The Ferryman.
(Photo by Mark Mainguy.)

To read more from Mona Zaidi and Rachel Offer's conversation and watch *Richard III: Unto the Kingdom of Perpetual Night*, visit alttheatre.ca.



R: What does it mean to you to use Shakespeare's work to discuss issues of migration and diaspora?

M: It is always a tricky line to walk as an artist, I think, of becoming political or becoming involved in the politics of the day. The images really came to me listening to the text itself, and I felt as though, "Okay if something from inside of me is speaking to me about these things, then I'm gonna have to explore it." It wasn't that I thought, "How can I make a film to put a spotlight on these important issues of today?" I try to rely on an internal compass to direct the work, and if my internal compass is telling me that this is the area that I have to explore, then I try to do it. But I try to do it from the perspective not so much of preaching that this or that is the right way or "Isn't this a terrible thing?" but in terms of owning my humanity, and in this way challenging the viewer also to own their humanity. In the sense of, "This is who we are. Is this who we want to be?" And not being afraid to just look at it face on.

James Joyce once said that the proper function of art is to induce aesthetic arrest. Just to make you say, "wow." The awe of it, the horror of it, just "wow." And anything that tries to persuade you or attract you or disgust you is just pornography. And if it's trying to teach you a lesson, it's even worse; it's just didactic pornography. I laughed when I first heard that, but the further I walk on this path, the more I think he was absolutely right. Really, in some ways the artistic experience has to be one with a spiritual connection with that animal that we are. And the excessive attempt to particularly sway your viewer in one direction or the other, I think, is not really the role of the artist. The role of the artist is to put the mirror in front of you and say, "This is it. This is what we are."

R: I'm not sure that all artists would agree with you.

M: No, absolutely not. [Laughs] Certainly not.

You know any culture you come from, there are certain invisible cages that your culture creates for you that you can't even see. For example, when you come from a monotheistic culture, one of the things we constantly have to remind ourselves is "Why am I only allowing for one god?" I find that in the discourse of the day, in the West, we must stay mindful of the fact that this tradition of monotheism leads us in a direction where there's one right answer. I think that the Eastern approach allows us a different perspective, which is to say that I have to find my own internal truth. For me, the search for an artist is to find that internal authenticity that is unique and particular to me, while recognizing that there is going to be that same but totally different unique authenticity in another human being. In India there is a tradition of saying "Namaste" to people. When it's translated, people often say, "The divine in me recognizes the divine in you." And I think that starts to touch on this journey that artists have to take, which is trying to find that unique authenticity in myself while simultaneously respecting that something unique and authentic is happening in you that's completely different.

Note

1. Qtd. in Ian Hughes, "Winner of Shakespeare Shorts Film Competition Announced," *Stratford Observer*, 26 September 2017.