Report
Asian Shakespeare Association Conference
All the World’s His Stage: Shakespeare Today
1-3 Dec. 2016,
Indira Gandhi Centre for Arts, New Delhi

2016, the year of Shakespeare, saw its culmination in the Asian Shakespeare Association’s biennial conference at Delhi in December. By all accounts it was a highly successful conference and the biggest event for the ASA during the year.

It presented three full days packed with 3 plenaries, 3 seminars, 19 panels, 65 paper presentations, 3 live performances, 2 film screenings, a manga workshop and, of course, a conference dinner (all included in the registration fee). The weather was propitious: the oncoming winter season did bring in an early morning fog and a little nip in the air, but this soon lifted to usher in bright sunshine. No flights were diverted and tea/coffee and lunch could be enjoyed by all at the open-air cafeteria. The venue of the conference, the refurbished colonial building of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts with its spacious lawns and other exhibitions, a product of the Nehruvian vision for modern India, lent its own charm and graciousness to the occasion.
Inaugural

The conference began with the traditional Indian custom of lighting a lamp by the members of the executive. This was accompanied by the chanting of a Vedic hymn symbolising the advent of the light of knowledge. The delegates were welcomed by a video message from the President of the Association, Bi-qi Beatrice Lei, who unfortunately could not be present. The chief executive of the IGNCA, Dr. Sachchidanand Joshi addressed the conference emphasising the enduring appeal of Shakespeare.
The ASA signature book, select proceedings from the previous conference (Taipei 2013), *Shakespeare’s Asian Journeys: Critical Encounters, Cultural Geographies and the Politics of Travel* (New York: Routledge, 2017) edited by Bi-qi Beatrice Lei, Judy Celine Ick and Poonam Trivedi was launched at the end of the inaugural session. Prof. Christy Desmet introduced the book and spoke appreciatively about its aim to further the critical discourse around Shakespeare with Asia, and through Asia.

The theme of the conference at Delhi 2016, ‘All the World’s his Stage: Shakespeare Today’ marked the Association’s journey from an Asian focus, to now a widening out to embrace the whole world. We were privileged to welcome over a hundred participants from nineteen countries: Australia, Canada, China, France, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Taiwan, United Kingdom and United States of America. A truly international and global congregation of young and senior scholars and students of Shakespeare gathered – the largest such in Delhi for a long time - and each of whom was honoured by the bestowing of a ceremonial drape, *angavastram*, before their presentations.

Welcoming Huda Tayyab from Lahore, Pakistan (right). Shakespeare literally helping the crossing of the thorniest of borders.
The icon and image of the conference, of the poet in a self-reflexive stance, gazing at a crystal-ball globe / Globe, encapsulated this theme, representing both the global spread of Shakespeare and the need to reflect and deliberate not just on the past and present, but also the future of Shakespeare Studies. And the three days of the conference presentations more than lived up to this. Archives were combed, ideas exchanged and buzzwords coined.
Plenaries and Panels

The first plenary by Prof. Christy Desmet (Univ. of Georgia, USA) put the ‘appropriation’ of Shakespeare centre stage: it argued that this was the mode through which Shakespeare is increasingly traversing the world, meaning differently from different angles and positions, and how this ‘disorienting’ but creative Shakespeare needs to be embraced and discussed.

The largest segment of papers brought alive the latest, critical and innovative representations of the plays on the stages of all these nineteen countries and more. Not just theatre but also the world of Shakespearean cinema, and its digital and graphic redactions was also viewed, reviewed and interrogated. Translations of Shakespeare, ranging from the Filipino, Hawaiian Pidgin to Hindi were analysed and re-contextualised. Adaptations, Shakespeare’s language and metaphors were given extended attention.

Panels wrestled with the text of Shakespeare: particularly, the Mistress Quickly plays, reminding us of editorial challenges and aporias. Hamlet and Measure for Measure were put under special scrutiny by whole panels. And many papers on the themes of marriage, patriarchy, governance, racism, nativism, death, dying and women re-examined and remapped their manifestations in the plays. The seminars debated at some length the benefits, but also the drawbacks, of the increasing role of technology in Shakespeare study; the negotiation of Shakespearean characters in performance over time and space and on the recent explosion of Bollywood film versions.
Shakespeare, the poet and artist, was not spared enquiry either. The second plenary by Prof. Sukanta Chaudhuri examined the conundrum of his enduring appeal and relevance across centuries and cultures, the man (or woman) for all seasons as it were, and concluded that since he/she seemed to defy all estimations, he may best be seen as an ‘anonymous benefactor’.

In contrast, the final plenary by Prof. Michael Dobson traced the construction of Shakespeare’s Rome as an ideal of freedom, beckoning nations and peoples over centuries and mirrored in stellar productions, both eastern and western, of which he showed us intriguing glimpses.
Performances

Three live performances, especially scheduled for the conference, varied in themselves and in what they made of Shakespeare, were the other major highlight of the conference. They were followed by wide-ranging discussions with the director and cast. The opening production by Mumbai’s Cinematograph, directed by Rajat Kapoor (right, below) was a satirical take, in English and gibberish, on Shakespearean comedy, *I Don’t Like It / As You Like It*. It had a group of clowns attempting to interpret the play from their own individual perspectives with hilarious and disconcerting results. It was presented at the specially made available National School of Drama’s Abhimanch auditorium, one of the few venues in the city able to handle the stunning set of the forest.
The second production, directed by K. Madavane and presented by the young actors of the Shri Ram Repertory, at the central hub of Delhi theatre, the Shri Ram Centre, was a serious and sensitive re-appraisal, in Hindi translation, of the mystery that is *Hamlet*, and his youthful confusions and swings between father and mother, political and personal desires. It was remarked how freely the actors, many of them well known theatre and film artists, interacted with the audience taking on their questions and posing for photographs.

On the third day, we were entertained by a solo interactive performance from Mumbai, *Dying to Succeed*, by the energetic Yuki Ellias, who took a decidedly contemporary slant on Shakespeare and placed many of the characters, both male and female, in today’s corporate world with startling relevance.

Indian performances of Shakespeare do not travel often and the conference was privileged to offer these professional shows for the delegates.
Screenings

The new, then not released film, *Veeram*, a Malayalam adaptation of *Macbeth*, was given a special preview at the conference. We also had the added benefit of having the director, Jayaraj, (of *Kaliyattam* fame) himself present to talk about the making of his visually spectacular film and his continuing interest in Shakespeare. It became another memorable occasion.

An anime cult film, adapted by manga artist Harumo Sanazaki, *Hamlet: A Reinvention of the Tragedy with Puppets* was also given the first screening in India and aroused great interest.
Manga Workshop

Sanazaki further enthralled everyone with her magical deftness as a manga artist, in a manga workshop where she not only created amazing visualisations of Shakespeare’s characters and stories but also talked about manga aesthetics and structure, and inspired participants to create their own versions.

The conference was made possible by the collaboration of a range of partners, sponsors, benefactors, and not the least, the most friendly, efficient and dedicated band of volunteers to all of whom the Asian Shakespeare Association remains deeply beholden. Hopefully, this elaboration will assure our members that future ASA events promise to be equally, if not more, action packed, enjoyable learning experiences.
Refreshment and relaxation in the spacious environs of the IGNCA
ASA Board meeting at the India International Centre, before the conference dinner.

More information and photos of the conference are available on its website asadelhi2016.wordpress.com

Publication

The ASA is committed not just to organising the discourse on Shakespeare but also to the publication of selected papers from the conference. All participants are requested to let us know at asadelhi2016@gmail.com by 31 July 2017 whether their papers are available for publication. A select shortlist will be drawn up and authors contacted for revision and submission at the earliest.

Poonam Trivedi
Director Conference
OBITUARY

Professor Sarbani Choudhury (1957-2016)

Professor Sarbani Choudhury passed away suddenly in the early hours of 29 December 2016 leaving all her family, friends, colleagues and students shocked and distraught. She had been teaching at Kalyani University, West Bengal, since 1985 and had served two terms as Head, Dept. of English. Her areas of specialisation were the Renaissance and Shakespeare in particular, post-colonial and Indian Shakespeare, Women’s Writing and Feminist Theory. A fount of energy and dynamism, she lectured extensively outside her university, had several books, including an edition of The Tempest, and numerous articles in national and international journals to her credit. She was a contributor to the World Shakespeare Bibliography Online and the book review editor for Multicultural Shakespeare. She had been honoured by many awards including research grants from the British Council, Folger Library and the University Grants Commission Major Research Project.

Sarbani was also one of the founding members of the Asian Shakespeare Association and had presented at the conference in Taipei (2014). She was part of the conference committee for the Delhi Conference and presented a paper and chaired a session for it. She had offered to hold smaller workshop cum seminars for the newly established ASA – India chapter. Her untimely demise is a huge loss for Shakespeare Studies in India, for the ASA and for the larger Shakespearean community.

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For me, it is a personal loss too as she and I had shared many an occasion. I remember the long evenings during the conferences at Hyderabad, Sambalpur and Paris especially, when we had the time to communicate beyond the professional. The panel I proposed for Shakespeare 450 ‘Telling Tales of Shakespeare: Indian Ishtyle’ at Paris was entirely at her insistence. We shared a flat during the conference and also had our papers published in the proceedings. I will miss Sarbani’s enthusiasm, charm and sharp responses for a long time.

Poonam Trivedi