

## Bringing Shakespeare to Dubai: On Cultural Transfer of Shakespearean Drama, 2012–2020

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**Abstract:** No one doubts that Shakespeare is a unique, universal icon ingrained in the collective consciousness all over the globe; therefore, his presence in the Middle Eastern cultural perception should not come as a surprise. In fact, the Bard is one of the very few easily recognizable Western artists in this GCC region. In my article, I examine the problem of a specific transfer of Shakespearean drama to Dubai, and I put in question Bard's total universality. To explain my thesis, I made an attempt to provide comprehensive characteristics of this young Muslim Emirate, which in less than fifty years of its existence has become an extremely successful, multicultural, and sociological experiment with more than two hundred coexisting nationalities. I concentrate on several cultural factors that affect the dramas' relocation and how theatre managers/directors/artistic directors manage with that challenge. I review processes of possible adaptations conducted in order to satisfy prospective theatrical audience of multitude backgrounds and cultural requirements as well as expectations of this Islamic Emirate (including reasons for censorship). I aim to give a general picture of Dubai theatres, both mainstream show business stages together with as independent performing arts venues; I explain reasons for little presence of particular Shakespeare's dramas, possible misinterpretations and justifications for oeuvre selection that was done in the certain period of time 2012–2020. To present the most comprehensive picture of Shakespeare's drama relocation to Dubai, I was pleased to conduct multitude conversations with highly respected and esteemed people of culture and arts who represent honourable institutions of Dubai – Mr. Yasser Al Gargawi Director of Cultural Events in the Ministry of Culture & Knowledge Development, currently the Chairman of Dubai National Theatre, Mr. Joseph Fowler, Director of Dubai Opera, Arts & Culture for the World Exhibition - Expo 2020, and Mr. Gautam Goenka, Artistic Director and Co-Founder of The Junction (theatre).

It is believed that Shakespeare is a unique, universal icon ingrained in the collective consciousness all over the world; therefore, his presence in the Middle Eastern cultural perception should not come as a surprise. In fact, the Bard

is an artistic and cultural brand in this Arabic region; however, when one takes into consideration what gets transferred out of the Shakespearean dramas, his art's alleged universality needs to be put into question.<sup>1</sup>

I would like to examine the problem of a specific relocation of Shakespearean drama to Dubai, a very young Islamic Emirate that in less than fifty years of its existence has become a hub of multicultural exchange with 202 coexisting nationalities. In particular, I would like to concentrate on cultural differences, local customs and traditions that forefend some potential actions on stage and on the diverse cultural codes that may disturb or preclude reception of the content – ideas, motifs or reasons for characters' actions. Shakespearean "total" universalism becomes questionable when one tries to relocate his plays to the local environment with its heterogeneous audiences who do not share a Western cultural background, reject, and interpret differently Shakespeare's oeuvre. I would like to address the problem of staging Shakespeare's works in the specific context of Dubai: discuss the unique character of the city and its brief history, reasons for selecting Shakespearean productions and the adaptation strategies deployed in accommodating Shakespeare into the culture of Dubai.

### **The character of the City – Dubai: an experimental city**

To fully understand the problem of the Bard's drama being relocated to this region, it is important to recognize the historical and cultural uniqueness of Dubai, one of the seven Emirates, which emerged from the desert and became an icon of economic prosperity and modernism in an extremely short time. This unique Arab, Muslim metropolis transformed into a cosmopolitan, multicultural, multi-religious and multi-lingual nucleus of varied traditions and at the same time home to expats from all over the world within a forty-eight year-period. It is important to have a quick look at some facts that may frame a picture of the country and Dubai's particular distinctiveness from a historical perspective. The region of today's United Arab Emirates was dominated by the British Empire for more than two hundred years up to the early 1970s. The British departure from the region evoked an immense geopolitical transformation, which was the catalyst for the union between Dubai and the

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1 The theory that Shakespeare is a universal icon is widely shared within academic and non-academic circles; I participated in the wide-ranging discussions over the bard's universality during the conferences, ESRA conference held in Gdansk 27–30 July 2017, e.g.

other six local Sheikhdoms. In 1972 Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the Ruler of Abu Dhabi at that time, and Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, the Ruler of Dubai, officially founded the new federation that gave birth to what is now known as the United Arab Emirates. That was the beginning of rapid growth in a region originally inhabited by Bedouin tribes, who lived nomadic lives sustained through fishing, herding, date farming and trading (*The Report Dubai 2015*, 18).<sup>2</sup> The discovery and exploitation of oil, political stability together with visionary leadership, led Dubai to unbelievable prosperity and, again, I would like to highlight that it completely metamorphosed in just 48 years. Interestingly, Dubai was evolving quite slowly before establishing the Union. This fishermen and pearl hunters' village altered into a small, more or less urban place which Jim Krane in his book *City of Gold* (2010, 302–303) calls a muddy town that "... wasn't electrified until the 1960s." In the 1970s everything changed; Krane underlines the uniqueness of the sudden and rapid growth of Dubai:

However improbable its leader's [Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Ruler of Dubai since 1990] goals, Dubai has undergone perhaps the fastest rise to wealth from underdevelopment in the history of the world. Men born into hand-to-mouth subsistence now live in greater splendor than the tycoons of Beverly Hills and Long Island. Dubai's rise was so improbable that it makes sense for Sheikh Mohammed to think big when he triangulates where the city will go in the current century.<sup>3</sup> (2010, 302–303)

Dubai is an exceptional experiment. The city grows at an extremely fast pace and "Though this be madness, yet there's method in't". Apparently, nothing is impossible in this city of wonders with its glittering skyscrapers, black marble boulevards, human made peninsulas, islands, lakes and rivers. It is necessary to point out here that this Middle East Disneyland is not a "child" of funds and national economic prosperity only, but in fact, it is a city built on particular dreams and visions accompanied by concrete, precise plans and strategies.

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2 Oxford Business Group. 2015. *The Report Dubai 2015*. Accessed May 27, 2018. [www.oxfordbusinessgroup.com/country/UAE:Dubai](http://www.oxfordbusinessgroup.com/country/UAE:Dubai).

3 Krane, J. 2010. *City of Gold*. New York: Picador.

Innovation and multiculturalism are part of the UEA's cultural mission and vision. The Ministry of Culture and Knowledge Development states on its official website that, among other tasks, it "works to enrich the cultural ecosystem in the UAE through ... providing a platform for artistic talent and innovation [as well as] promoting cross-cultural dialogues."<sup>4</sup> Whilst the city is becoming a hub of international, multicultural and peaceful cultural exchange, it still needs time to evolve. A number of observers have accused Dubai of lacking in genuine soul or permanent, come-to-stay for long term foreign residents.<sup>5</sup> Yet, these are harsh and erroneous criticisms: the city's urban structure changes on a daily basis<sup>6</sup> as does its cultural scene and social platform. For instance, Krane (2010, 305), who represents Western perspective, stated in 2010 that, "Dubai's cultural side is in its infancy" and explained that the most rapid artistic movement was observed in Al Quoz industrial district<sup>7</sup> where, after changing it into galleries and artistic centres, foreign artists mainly from Egypt, Syria and Iran exhibited and sold their works. He argued that "Dubai has [had] precious little in the way of theatre, museums, or music. There is no garage culture of rock bands, nothing in the way of neighbourhood theatres, no modern dance, no writers' hangouts" (Krane 2010, 305). At the time of writing this essay in 2020, these statements are no longer true. In fact, Al Quoz still offers art galleries; however, the owners and the artists represent a more diverse spectrum of nationalities, including the Emiratis, Westerners, Jordanians, Lebanese, Indians and many more. The two new initiatives in the district are worthy of note: The Junction and The Courtyard Playhouse,<sup>8</sup> which are unique, small theatrical venues that play an important role in the artistic bohemia mentioned by Krane. Both theatres play a most vibrant role in the city and the playhouse owners' attitude and passion, together with their concrete strategies, guarantee the theatres' development in the local artistic field as well as its repertoire diversity. Moreover, in 2015

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4 United Arab Emirates Ministry of Culture and Knowledge Development. 2012. Accessed December 15, 2019. <https://www.mckd.gov.ae/en/about/>.

5 Many foreigners only come to Dubai for the length of their contracts and do not appear to contribute to its cultural development or integrate with local citizens.

6 Nothing is ever impossible in Dubai, as Anthony Harris (qtd. in Krane) comments: "Can you build another row of shoreline apartments in front of the ones you just built? Of course, you can! Let's have another row of shoreline apartments in front of the shoreline apartments" (Krane 2010, 304).

7 The Al Quoz district is the semi industrial part of the city, ten minutes from Madinat Theatre, fifteen minutes away from the famous 7-star hotel Burj Al Arab and the public beaches.

8 The Courtyard Playhouse was established in 2013 and The Junction Theatre - a small stage (160 seats) private playhouse- in 2015.

Dubai welcomed another venue, the scene that changed the character of the city and enriched its cultural capital – the Dubai Opera house. That project greatly differs from the theatres of the Al Quoz district and serves an entirely different function; its establishment proves fact that Dubai has an ambitious and varied plan for its cultural development. Indeed, the distinctiveness of the old and new venues, their contrasting visions and missions clearly evidence artistic diversity of the city. All these new projects corroborate the thesis of the rapid cultural development of Dubai as well as the direction of changes implemented by the authorities and the community.

To conclude, the city has accomplished the dream of highly ambitious achievements in an extremely short time. A new quality metropolis is becoming a modern platform for all nationalities and cultures as Krane (2010, 311) observes “Sheikh Mohammed wants to recreate ... the ancient spirit of learning and tolerance. But his ambitions go beyond that. He views Dubai as the engine that will drag the Arab world into a renaissance.” It seems that these plans of the Ruler of Dubai are already achieved; however, the shape and the character of the city evolve and mature every single day. Having outlined the picture and short characteristic of Dubai, there is a need to examine the nature of the population that inhabits the region and is a potential audience of Shakespeare transferred to this Islamic “wonderland.”

### **Shakespeare’s prospective audience in Dubai**

Dubai is the planet’s most cosmopolitan and tolerant city, a beacon of peace and prosperity where all of mankind is welcome .... This is the city’s greatest achievement. (Krane 2010, 307)

Dubai is a particularly unique stage for Shakespearean drama, and this results from the multiplicity and structure of the local population and by extension, the prospective drama producers and the audience. “Since 2000 the emirate’s population has more than doubled, almost entirely as a result of foreigners settling in the UAE. As for the end of 2012, Emiratis made up around 11% of the population, while expatriates account for the remaining 89%” as *The Report Dubai 2015* (2015, 21)<sup>9</sup> states. It has been noted that: “As we step into 2020, we reflect on the way the nation’s

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9 Oxford Business Group. 2015. *The Report Dubai 2015*. Accessed May 27, 2018. [www.oxfordbusinessgroup.com/country/UAE:Dubai](http://www.oxfordbusinessgroup.com/country/UAE:Dubai).

population has grown more diverse and how its vibrant expatriate community (which makes up around 80% of the population) has had a profound impact on the country's culture" as Global Media Insight informs in their "United Arab Population Statistics."<sup>10</sup> Estimates of Dubai's total population, 3.32 million in 2020 (Global Media Insight, 2020), are based on flows of migrants rather than the number of permanent residents. A bigger picture of the migration scale should be considered, though. The UAE population includes circa about 9.5 million people in total, and over 55% of the residents originate from South Asia (including India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka), 11% are Emirati, 12% are Arabs from Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and only 4% of nationals from Western countries in 2016<sup>11</sup> (Abu Dhabi2 Information for Residents & Travelers, 2020). These data illustrate the nature of the local multi-ethnic environment and give an idea of the scale of globalization that occurs here. Even though the number of the Westerners is not overwhelming, Dubai, with its liberal approach to integration with other cultures, directs its interest towards (among others) Western civilization. Therefore, it seems only natural that Shakespeare as the most widely recognizable intellectual and cultural icon is transferred and adapted. In fact, the Bard's dramas are constantly staged and tailored to fit the local environment of potential theatregoers who have had diverse exposure to the performative arts and have been of different traditional as well as educational backgrounds. One may say that Shakespeare knocks at Arab households and, after some alterations made to his art, he is doing that quite successfully.

### Questioning Shakespeare's universality: case study one

According to Gautam Goenka, Artistic Director and Co-Founder of The Junction in Dubai, over the past fourteen years the number of productions of plays by Shakespeare staged or invited to the local theatres<sup>12</sup> has been rapidly increasing. However, as I have observed, the selection of the plays (that are usually staged in the classical way) is constant and rather limited. Among all Shakespearean tragedies, only a few are most welcome on Dubai's stages and they are *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear* and *Othello*. I believe there are two main reasons for this choice. Firstly, these plays are the most famous, iconic,

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10 Global Media Insight. 2020. United Arab Emirates Population Statistics. Infographics. Accessed April 12, 2020. <https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/uae-population-statistics/>.

11 Abu Dhabi2 Information for Residents and Travelers. 2016. Nationality Wise Population in Seven Emirates of UAE. Accessed April 14, 2020. <http://www.abudhabi2.com/uae-population-by-nationality/>.

12 I do not mention school productions here.

universal dramas about the human condition and wide scale of emotions. All of them may be embedded in any socio-cultural<sup>13</sup> context and, in fact, they are generally well perceived/understood by all spectators, whereas, for example, the reception of Shakespeare's history plays, such as the *Henriad*, or *King Richard III*, and, similarly, the Roman plays (*Titus Andronicus* or *Julius Caesar*), might be difficult for audiences whose collective consciousness is more heterogeneous. The historical, political, tragic as well as comic themes in these plays, such as the simultaneously comic and tragic dimensions of the drunken Falstaff, might not be readable for such a diverse audience. Secondly, the classical style<sup>14</sup> in which these mainstream tragedies are usually<sup>15</sup> staged must also be taken into account, since its aim is to avoid any mention of political or religious subtexts and strictly abide by the Emirati moral and legal codes.

There is a need to take into light Dubai's specific historical situation. As stated earlier, the real, experimentally rapid political, social and economic transition completely changed the Emirati way of life and rapidly opened them to the globalized world and, from the national perspective, the shift was not as easy as it may seem. As Wilson observes in his book *Rashid's Legacy. The Genesis of the Maktoum Family and the History of Dubai*:

They were faced with a nation that was backward and had been isolated from the rest of the world for more than a century. Bringing development to the Emirates meant opening up the country to a vast foreign influence that inevitably threatened the Emirati culture. Only by striking a careful balance did they guide their people and succeed in preserving a national identity while the people enjoyed the fruits of a massive social and economic boom.<sup>16</sup> (Wilson 2006, 543)

The experiment has been unique and difficult. The Emiratis had to balance and carefully conduct the process of cultural disclosure and decide on whether

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13 I would like to mention that possible Elizabethan cultural implications in, for example, *Othello* may not be decoded in a similar way as they are by Westerners.

14 I do not discuss the Elizabethan original way of staging here, but I use the word "classical" to present the nineteenth-century way of staging Shakespeare and reverence for the authority of his text.

15 Shakespearean famous dramas are usually staged in a "classical" way in Dubai; however, there are some exceptions to that rule.

16 Wilson, G. 2006. *Rashid's Legacy. The Genesis of the Maktoum Family and the History of Dubai*. Media Prima.

to adapt some elements of international, globalized culture. The main question that may still have been arising is how they should protect their own cultural identity from expansive, sometimes unwanted and unsuitable foreign influence. How to implement the best elements of transnational heritage without weakening the Emirati national spirit? Which cultural essentials to choose and how to apply them to local, traditional, and religious norms? The transfer of Shakespeare to Arabia is in fact the resettlement of a foreign culture, albeit a globalized one nowadays, but still belonging to Western, external and “imported” philosophy. The Emiratis found a solution. They have built a specific bridge between different, quite separate, traditions and have made an attempt to gently blend them. As a result, Dubai became a unique, cosmopolitan, tolerant city that carefully protects its national identity and local principles. It is a Muslim agglomeration and the artists, performers and theatrical managers must follow the rules and respect Islamic customs and ethos. To legally protect local values and morale, the UAE authorities imposed censorship that forbids anyone to stage and at the same time discuss or comment any regional politics, religion (Islam and other beliefs) or demonstrate any kind of pornography, which is interpreted very broadly here. Nudity on stage or any provocative, offensive sexual behavior/acting that may insult feelings of the varied audience, are strictly prohibited. Yasser Al Gergawi, the Director of Cultural Events in the UAE Ministry of Culture & Knowledge Development,<sup>17</sup> argues (Warrier in *Khaleej Times*, 2015) that the implemented restrictions are not intended to limit creativity in the arts:

Dubai censorship on creativity is minimal and aimed at safeguarding the sentiments of the Emirate’s public.... There are very few don’ts. Being negative about God or religion is one, whichever is the one you believe. Another is pornography. Politics is the third one. Do not get involved in politics. Being a peaceful place, the UAE doesn’t want to hurt the sentiments of others. Otherwise, you can speak whatever you want.<sup>18</sup> (Warrier, 2015)

17 Yasser Al Gergawi was an Acting Director of Projects and Events at the Department at the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority.

18 Warrier, A. 2015. A bit of good censorship can help creativity: Dubai Culture official. *Khaleej Times*, 12 March 2015. Accessed April 17, 2018. <http://www.khaleejtimes.com/nation/general/a-bit-of-good-censorship-can-help-creativity-dubai-culture-official?X-IgnoreUserAgent=1>.



The law and the respect for local traditions, customs and moral conduct prevailing in this part of the world may result in self-censorship as well. The artists and theatre managers are not willing to transfer the plays that may evoke constraints or be misinterpreted. That might be the reason for the absence of (e.g. *The Tempest*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Comedy of Errors*) or difficulties in the transition of some Shakespeare's comedies onto the big stages in the city. I would not suggest here that the comedies are not welcome in Dubai.<sup>19</sup> Instead, I would like to highlight the need for particular adjustment(s), subtle modifications of the text(s) or ways of staging that might be required in certain cases. Context and content of some of the dramas such as *The Merry Wives of Windsor* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and their sexual implications<sup>20</sup> cause considerable difficulties when the comedies are relocated in their original shapes. The Muslim perspective on the love affair between enchanted Titania and Bottom with the donkey's head is a case in point. What in the Western approach is perceived as a comic and relatively "innocent" motif of the play, from the Arab/Muslim perspective might be viewed as vulgar, disrespectful, and very abusive treatment of a woman. What is more, Titania's social roles in the play seem crucial as well: she is a wife and the Queen of fairies, an authoritative and esteemed persona who is sexually insulted. This is not a subject for comedy and might not be well perceived by an audience in Dubai. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that, when asked by Joseph Fowler, Dubai Opera Artistic Director (at that time),<sup>21</sup> to recommend a proper theatrical production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to be staged in June 2018, I found the task not an easy one, and finally I was not successful.<sup>22</sup> Fowler suggested that a perfect performance should be "a classical, 'light' production suitable for the family" (Joseph Fowler, 2017, personal communication). Without doubt, the Western theatrical troupes may offer a suitable show; however, the problem is that a vast majority of the critically acclaimed

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19 In 2019 Dubai Opera invited *Much Ado About Nothing* directed by Derek Bond, New English Shakespeare Company, UK.

20 It sounds like a commonplace, but themes naturally accepted by the Westerners, in Muslim culture could be perceived as unaccepted or illegal moral misconduct.

21 Currently, Director of Opera, Arts & Culture for the World Exhibition – Expo 2020, previously Fowler occupied the positions of General Manager at DUCTAC, Theatre & Entertainment Director at Madinat Theatre and Artistic Director, Director of Programming & Events at Dubai Opera.

22 Fowler explains "I programmed and presented a production of *Dream* which was adapted for younger/school audience, however, within the context of my search for the same title for inclusion within the Dubai Opera programme, I was seeking a larger scale professional production that would be suitable for a larger audience demographic" (Joseph Fowler, 2020, personal communication).

productions, which I know from Shakespearean festivals conducted in Europe, seem too “brave” or too “experimental”<sup>23</sup> to be staged in Arabia. For example, the two performances which were highly successful at the Gdansk Shakespeare Festival and could be recommended to be invited: The Baltic House Theatre’s *Dream* directed by Silviu Purcarete<sup>24</sup> and the South Korean production by Yo-hangza Company directed by Yang Jung-Ung, seem inappropriate to be staged in Dubai. Purcarete’s famous performance starts with historical and political allusions to communistic oppression that are easy to decode by Western audience and, at the same time, may be totally unclear for many Dubai spectators. What is more, Purcarete’s female fairies appear far too lascivious and extravagant to be accepted by the local audience. Yang-Ung’s production, in turn, relied heavily on South Korean theatrical conventions. While this performance appears exotic and attractive for the Festival audience in Europe (new interpretation, innovative approach to the well-known play, and multiple changes of the plot, chronology, staging, characters, shifting of attention to less known or less evident themes included in dramas, etc.) it was unlikely to suit the Dubai Opera audience expectations. The main problem here might be the audience requirements (a classical, standard Shakespearean performance without severe changes of the plot, but proper chronology, and “usual” characters) as well as “double decoding,” by which I understand a transfer of original Elizabethan drama into Korean theatrical style and cultural coding. That “alteration” was a highly anticipated practice by the majority of the Gdansk Festival spectators; however, the Dubai audience could be left unsatisfied with such a “strange Shakespeare/non-Shakespeare.” This does not mean that Dubai theatres absolutely refrain from staging “risky” dramas; instead, the prospective plays are tailored, trimmed, and then staged to fit the local standards. Fowler, who has invited numerous Shakespeare’s plays to the region, explains that: “Comedies are very much welcome and often better received than tragedies as these have a wider family appeal” (Fowler, 2017–2020, personal communication). Based on that, it seems that there is a space for the Bard’s witty dramas and tragedies, though, of course, they must be properly adjusted to certain local requirements and audience – thus usually staged in a “classical,” Victorian

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23 By “experimental” I mean, unusual, altered, non-classical in form or/and in contents shows.

24 The performance is the result of cooperation between Russian Baltic House Theatre and Romanian theatre director Silviu Purcarete.

style or sometimes modern, even avantgarde mode but modified in a particular way (no sexual, or political inclinations) to obtain acceptable moderate and balanced productions. It might be the reason why both of the shows – the Globe Theatre production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* performed at the Madinat Theatre in 2015 and *Othello Remix*, an original production of Chicago Shakespeare Theatre with collaboration of Richard Jordan Productions Ltd. were successful performances in Dubai. In fact, Fowler admitted that the comedy show was “designed especially for young people” (Joseph Fowler, 2017, personal communication) and therefore, had an educational purpose.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, the *risqué* aspect of the play was delivered carefully, in the same way as performances offered to the young all over the world. In the case of the second drama, Fowler claims that:

This all male production takes Shakespeare’s text and adapts it over original beats resulting in a hip-hop urban version of this classic play. A radical take on a classic proving that Shakespeare himself was the original master of rhythm and rhyme. I programmed this production at DUCATC and it was a huge success reconfirming again the appeal of Shakespeare but also demonstrating that the Dubai audience is prepared to discover new productions of Shakespearean classics. (Joseph Fowler, 2020, personal communication)

It shows that the key to success of this performance could have been an attractive form of a hip-hop musical adaptation that in fact remained a popular and often invited to the UAE concert shows. Moreover, Shakespearean flourish and difficult to follow original text was altered into a modern language of the young, the every-day English language of twenty-first-century media. Finally, the play was staged without any sexual, religious, or political leanings; it was just a universal, emotive, and passionate story about love, envy, anger, jealousy, and distrust. This *Othello* tells a core story of the drama simultaneously excluding ambiguous aspects of the tragedy.

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25 Fowler adds: “It is also important to emphasise that as a means of implementing an effective audience development plan, content for the younger audience demographic is of great importance. Cultivating an interest, understanding and appreciation for the theatre and the theatrical experience with young audiences is key to the long-term sustainability of a committed and loyal audience.” (Joseph Fowler, 2020, personal communication).

It proves my assumption that awareness of the rules, customs and traditions is an important feature when choosing the performances and their way of staging and even unconventional adaptations of Shakespearean dramas are welcomed in Dubai as long as they follow the rules.

### **Case study two: *Hamlet***

Interestingly, problems with transferring Shakespearean drama to Dubai may be not limited only to historical plays and comedies. There are some motifs, some specific cultural implications present in tragedies that may also cause confusion and, surprisingly, this may apply to the most famous tragedy: *Hamlet*. The spectators' approach to the central conflict of the play – Hamlet's angry reaction, in fact, a rebellion against his mother's decision to marry Claudius just a few months after her husband's death may cause some misunderstanding in the interpretation of the whole plot, including the Prince's actions and reasons for his further decisions. In Islamic tradition, a widow's prompt remarriage with the brother of a deceased husband (or just a close relative) is justifiable or even expected. It is a traditional custom or, in some regions, a family duty to provide a woman with support and protection that is understood as another marriage within a "clan." From this point of view, Hamlet's response to the matter may seem controversial, illogical or extreme. Put simply, what seems natural in some cultures may be perceived as unusual in others. I am not going to mention here the hypothetical problem of the *possible* cultural misunderstanding, but I present the conclusion I made after numerous discussions with my Arab students and theatregoers from the region. They drew my attention to the matter of the probable decoding problem(s); however, one must take into consideration that globalization and constant cultural exposition and exchange unified the language of arts and mutual understanding. Arab spectators are aware of Western customs and traditions,<sup>26</sup> so in many cases they may not have any problems with the interpretation and reading of this particular Shakespeare's message in the context of European lifestyle.

The issue of cultural decoding is a very important factor when choosing a performance, but there are other causes that may discourage theatre managers from inviting particular productions. In fact, some modern and highly experimental adaptations of Shakespeare's plays may be unaccepted or doomed

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26 Due to globalization and exposure to films, computer games, books, etc. Arabs perfectly well know Western conduct and style of life.

to failure. Moreover, the method of staging may be a crucial factor that decides whether the show is considered legal and there are cases when performances are definitely rejected. Deep changes made to the classical text, plot or chronology of action, political and religious connotations, or lasciviousness (acting, costumes etc.) on the stage exclude such productions from being staged in Dubai. It is, after all, the audience who decides what is appropriate and suits their tastes, and eventually has the final say in deciding whether to attend the show or not. Hence, artists, theatrical managers and producers must follow and satisfy local theatregoers' needs. Lastly, as Dubai spectators belong to diverse cultures, traditions and backgrounds, proper selection of the productions seems inevitable.

### **Dubai stages**

Dubai offers three types of playhouses – national Arabic centres, and two types of private sector stages – mainstream big scenes and smaller ones that seem to play the role of a kind of “off stages” or “independent performing arts venue(s)”<sup>27</sup> such as The Junction and The Courtyard Playhouse, mentioned earlier. I propose such a very general division for the sake of this article, and I would like to concentrate on the international stages to discuss the differences in the choice of Shakespeare's plays, in terms of staging and reception. The big stage theatres such as Madinat Theatre and the Dubai Opera House are very stylish, luxurious centers that represent a commercial side of the local show business. Ductac, a beautiful, elegant venue, alike the two mentioned before, offered parallel repertoire, and attracted similar audience, however it was not a typical commercial entity. Fowler explains the differences between the theatres:

Ductac was a not for profit community theatre which had to be auto sufficient in its financial structure in order to remain open and operational. Madinat Theatre is a commercial entity, however, sits within the larger portfolio of Madinat Jumeirah and therefore benefits directly and indirectly by this positioning. Dubai Opera is a commercial entity and relates on sponsorship, corporate partners, and self-generated revenue in order to operate. (Joseph Fowler, personal communication, 2020)

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<sup>27</sup> The Junction calls themselves that way on their website, available at: <http://www.thejunction-dubai.com/> (Accessed February 4, 2020).

The venues operational systems differ, but they have a lot in common. All of them are settled in hotspots of the city, the prestigious must-go-to places frequently visited by numerous residents. The Madinat Theatre, with its marble interior, crystal chandeliers and bunches of fresh flowers on white round tables describes itself on its website as “a state-of-the-art venue situated in the heart of the bustling Souk Madinat Jumeirah.” I would like to add here that this Souk is a counterpart to an old traditional Arabic trade market surrounded by the most deluxe beach hotel resorts with canals, waterside fancy restaurants and promenades with the view on the one of the most famous Dubai landmarks – Burj Al Arab, the seven star chic hotel that is presumed to be the most expensive in the world. The Madinat’s website comments on its venue:

The Madinat Theatre is a space which can accommodate large-scale shows but with an intimacy that allows the audience to truly connect with the production and the performers. Guests enter the theatre through the reception foyer with its grand columns and marble floors proceeding into the main auditorium where plush tiered seating and soft lighting set the scene for the performance. The Madinat theatre is ideally suited for Musicals, Plays, Classical Ballet, Stand-up Comedy and has the audio-visual support for film screenings.<sup>28</sup> (Madinat Theatre website, 2017)

The playhouse’s setting and its elegant design play an important role: they attract a wealthy audience and preordain a certain type of mainstream performances that are to be welcome. The other venue that might have been compared to the Madinat in terms of audience and types of invited shows was The Center Point Theatre, Ductac. Unfortunately, in July 2018, due to unknown reasons, the theatre was closed and, as Pdraig Downey, who directed and produced ten shows at Ductac up to 2018, said for *Khaleej Times Magazine*:

It was a community theatre that brought everyone together: Emiratis, Arabs and expats. The closure of Dubai Community Theatre and Arts Center (Ductac) marks a huge blow to the arts scene in Dubai.

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28 Madinat Theatre Souk Madinat Jumeirah. 2015. Accessed November 15, 2017. <https://madinat-jumeirah.etixdubai.com/>

Ductac was a more intimate style theatre that had a commercial element to it. The stage's location in a shopping mall gave it a commercial element that satisfied Dubai's nature. We got flyers on shows distributed to shoppers and strong social media pages. People had general knowledge about the space. (Zakaria in Khaleej Times, 2018)

Indeed, this playhouse had a specific location as it belonged to Mall of Emirates, one of the prime and most luxurious shopping centres worldwide, well known for offering the biggest indoor ski slope in the world. In fact, the mall looks like a museum or a gallery of fine arts with its majestic interior design - glass ceilings, beautiful hall exhibitions, displays and cultural activities offered to the visitors on various occasions. The playhouse was one of the most popular cultural destinations in Dubai. Interestingly, Fowler says:

Ductac provided the largest community and local offering for amateur dramatics as well as performance and visual arts education. The seasonal programme I curated during my tenure as general manager was an equally balanced offering of local/amateur content that sat alongside professional regional and international productions. The closure of Ductac paved the way for The Junction and The Courtyard Playhouse who have filled a degree of the void the absence of Ductac has created. (Joseph Fowler, personal communication, 2020)

Certainly, Ductac offered a wide variety of activities such as theatrical competitions, acting and dancing classes for children as well as young students and was a very dynamic player on the local artistic stage. Downey adds: "[Ductac was] at the heartbeat of the theatre and arts community for a decade and has been [was] the life and soul of the community."

Last but not least, it is essential to take a look at the greatest venue in Dubai, already mentioned in this article: the Dubai Opera called by Fowler a "commercial professional venue that promote and present professional medium to large scale international productions." The venue is an impressive construction placed in the heart of Dubai, the Downtown area with Burj Khalifa, Dubai Fountains and Sheikh's Boulevard. The playhouse is designed for a more numerous audiences and for bigger scale projects than The Madinat and Ductac. The Opera's Website informs us that:

Located at what's billed as 'the most prestigious square kilometre in the world', Dubai Opera is the radiant centre of culture and arts in Downtown Dubai and the shining pearl of The Opera District. With its unique 2000-seat multi-format theatre, Dubai Opera is a definitive international destination for performing arts and world-class entertainment productions. Dubai Opera passionately embraces its role as the vibrant cultural heart of Dubai, and is committed to produce and host the finest, authentic, creative, and engaging performing arts experiences from Dubai and the world.<sup>29</sup> (Dubai Opera website)

Undeniably, the scale and beauty of the playhouse is breathtaking, and the shows invited by the Opera reflect its mission. The two theatres (plus Ductac until 2018) also target affluent spectators and propose similar mainstream entertainment; they belong to Dubai show business, which aims to amuse, promote the arts, educate and, at the same time, make a profit. Therefore, the choice of Shakespeare's plays for these stages is mainly driven by audience satisfaction, which is natural when we take into consideration the private sector objectives. For that reason, the selected performances are usually mainstream ones, widely known and acclaimed. Fowler explains the choices of the performances he invited to the three venues he managed:

Prior to my current position, in the positions I have occupied at DUCTAC, Madinat Theatre and Dubai Opera, I have [had] responsibilities not only to create and implement a diverse programme, but also ensure that the content I am programming is not only in alignment with the profile of venue in question but will also contribute to the artistic landscape of the city, and indeed the region. It is also of great importance that the productions I select and programme also contribute to the enhancement of appreciation for the respective art forms and the heritage they represent. With these criteria in mind, as well as an important respect for the local customs and cultural sensitivities of the UAE, I have programmed, with a certain degree of caution, works by Shakespeare placing emphasis on well-known titles and also productions that

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29 Dubai Opera. Available at: <http://www.dubaiopera.com/about-us/> (accessed November 17, 2017).



have a particular academic relevance and/or associated academic programme that has a relevance and value in relation to the academic syllabus of the particular year/ season. The Globe is a very good example of these criteria. (Joseph Fowler, 2020, personal communication)

Fowler reveals the reasons for his selections, which not only seem reasonable but also guarantee commercial and artistic success. Characteristics of the performances that satisfy the needs of the particular group of spectators who visit the mainstream theatres in Dubai will now be discussed.

### **Case study three: commercial Shakespearean productions**

Commercial theatres usually limit their canon to the tragedies, as signalled earlier in this article. The adaptations are usually (believed to be) “classical,”<sup>30</sup> with the full text, true to the original plot that is presented in chronological order, stunning costumes and numerous props. Changes made to the original versions of the Bard’s plays (if any) are usually driven by the necessity to omit the parts deemed morally unsuitable to be staged in Dubai<sup>31</sup> or to cut the long texts. These modifications are not meant to send any specific “message,” introduce new meaning or a new context. I have observed two reasons for that; firstly, the audience may not recognize the director’s intentions; secondly, such modifications might be misunderstood, and they may confuse or even disturb comprehension. The shows should be traditional; thus, the producers implement classical stage design, traditional text delivery and music. The staging ought to be as universal as possible since the shows aim at gathering a numerous and international audience, including UAE officials, authorities, representatives of local artistic environment and ordinary spectators of all nationalities. The performances are usually produced by recognizable, famous institutions that guarantee both the audience’s satisfaction and commercial success. Al Gargawi explains that:

... most of the private sector in this part of the world prefer to go to mother home of Shakespeare and that is the reason Dubai

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30 The first exception to the rule “only traditional Shakespeare on commercial stages” was *Othello*, invited (by Joseph Fowler) to Dubai Opera in January 2019 and produced by Richard Twyman, English Touring Theatre from London.

31 In this case, after certain adaptations, the comedies fit the standards.

theatrical event managers try to contact The Globe Theatre, recognized as the most prestigious institution and authority on Shakespeare and sign contracts with them. (Yasser Al Gargawi, 2017, personal communication)<sup>32</sup>

The Globe Theatre is a good example here. Being a very prestigious, famous and internationally recognizable organization, they have become a very active contributor to the local show business. There have been numerous Shakespeare productions offered by them during the last few years, both for young spectators as well as for adults. The Globe Education section, which specializes in the theatre and theatrical education for the young, cooperated with The Madinat Theatre and have (among others) staged *Macbeth* (2011), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2012) (both directed by Bill Buckurst), *Romeo and Juliet* (2013), *Othello* (2014).<sup>33</sup> All the performances might be classified as traditional, universal productions that were conventionally and very professionally staged for firmly educational purposes. Fowler claims that the shows he invited were successful and the multinational (mostly Western) audiences responded enthusiastically.

Amongst the target audiences were of course schools, both locally based [Dubai] and nationally from across the UAE. Schools from Al Ain, Fujairah, Sharjah and Abu Dhabi regularly attended school performances of the Shakespeare titles I programmed. In regard to nationalities, these were varied with the vast majority being English native speakers, as well as Europeans. Attendance figures would have been an average of 70% capacity of the Madinat Theatre which would equate to approximately 315 per show. I would usually programme 6 to 8 performances of each title. (Joseph Fowler, 2017, personal communication)

The majority of The Globe Theatre's productions seem to be very prosperous in Dubai; thus, it may not come as surprise that another production offered by the troupe, this time dedicated to an adult audience, was a classical *Hamlet*

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32 Quotation with a permission of Yasser Al Gergawi, recorded messenger discussion on June 4, 2017.

33 Playing Shakespeare with Deutsche Bank was the Globe Education's flagship programme for schools in the region.

directed by Dominic Dromgoole, and staged at The Centrepoint Theatre, Ductac in 2015. Dubai was one of the cities the troupe visited during their two-year international and acclaimed award-winning tour (UNESCO patronage) to commemorate Shakespeare. The director presented a traditional performance suitable for the multicultural expatriates as well as the Emiratis. His *Hamlet* was a faithful version of the play with an effort to take up Shakespeare's way of staging as much as it was only possible. The show was very well acted, energetic, classical and was well received by the local audience that numerous attended the production (the tickets were sold out). These examples give an idea of commercial, professional productions welcomed on Dubai big stages that offer "big name" shows produced by prestigious companies and gather large audiences. According to Al Gergawi during the last five years over 15,000 spectators attended the Bard's performances staged in the main theatres and this number is just a vague estimate.

#### **Case study four: non-commercial Shakespearean productions**

In order to present a complete picture of Shakespeare's presence in the city, we need to take into consideration other stages with smaller scale productions that are addressed to a slightly different audience than the one described above: The Courtyard Playhouse and The Junction with their small but convenient stages, alternative programmes and limited number of seats.

The first one, The Courtyard Playhouse, "the passion project" as the founders call it themselves is a KHDA<sup>34</sup> licensed Performing Arts Training Centre Home to Theatre sports. It is a small-scale project, owned as well as managed by Joanna Kemsley Dickinson and Tiffany Schultz from England and South Africa respectively, and run by a very prolific community of artists, volunteers and performers<sup>35</sup> who describe themselves on their website in the following fashion:

... we wanted to have a 'home' for Drama Dubai. We were also tired of complaining about the 'soulless' feeling at some theatres and art spaces in Dubai and decided to create something which contrasts sharply with the stereotypical Dubai image of the best, biggest, most famous, etc. ... so the Playhouse is small, intimate,

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34 Knowledge and Human Development Authority in Dubai, Dubai Governmental body.

35 Expats and young Emirati.

cosy, quirky, genuinely community-based and made with a lot of love and passion.<sup>36</sup> (Courtyard Playhouse website)

They play a diametrically diverse role in Dubai culture. This kind of a playhouse is not a part of mainstream show business. The Courtyard Playhouse attracts international spectators who become involved in theatrical productions; it often showcases amateur actors, actresses, directors, dramatists et cetera:

[We wanted to] to create a space for locally based talent to develop and thrive. A space where artists, writers, directors and community groups could afford to hire and not have to compromise artistically because of the overriding need to sell tickets.... We now have a full complement of workshops for all ages and events almost every night from stand-up comedy and improv' to community theatre productions and National Theatre screenings. (Courtyard Playhouse website)

The community is important in terms of enriching the local artistic stage; however, they do not greatly contribute the relocation of Shakespeare's dramas. I learnt that they are improvisational theatre and they do not usually *perform* Shakespeare; instead, they broadcast National Theatre Live and Royal Shakespeare Company's productions at their playhouse. The latest live Shakespearean screening organized by The Courtyard Playhouse was *Julius Caesar* by the National Theatre Live, broadcast live from The Bridge Theatre from London in 2018, which they perceive as an accomplishment. The audience was not very numerous; however, from the perspective of the multinationalism of the spectators and their active contribution, the show is considered a success.

The other theatre located in the same district is The Junction, a small playhouse launching many artistic events, with ambitious plans for the future and involved in Shakespearean productions. Goenka gives details about their idea of the theatre:

In the last years The Junction has hosted over 100+ events including theatre, music, dance, drama, comedy and poetry. The philosophy of the venue remains to foster talent from UAE for the

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36 Courtyard Playhouse. Accessed December 15, 2018. <https://courtyardplayhouse.com/about/our-story/>.

UAE. A feasibility project was started in early 2012 to see what it would take to build our own space. In 2014 we approached Alserkal Avenue to see if they would like to house this project. In the same year, 3 families came together to fund this initiative. The active partners were Gautam Goenka (me), Rashmi Kotriwala and Arjun Burman. All funding for the space came from these partners [Indian origin expats settled in Dubai].... After many delays, bumps, hurdles and challenges The Junction was inaugurated on 18th November 2015. ... (Gautam Goenka, 2017, personal communication)

This description reveals facts about the origin of the project and venue itself, it demonstrates the spirit of the place and commitment of the owners. In fact, the Junction became a home for specific art lovers, people who are involved in productions in their free time, coming from various cultural backgrounds. The vast majority of the plays (Shakespearean and other dramas) are acted by amateurs for a limited international audience (160 seats). The stage usually promotes nonprofessional or not well-known artists who can contribute to the development of the “off stage,” independent performing arts theatre in Dubai. The casts usually consist of multinational actors, directors, musicians, and production staff. According to Goenka, this international diversity of people engaged in a production guarantees the interest of spectators of various origins and helps in gaining a multicultural and numerous audiences. The expectations of the spectators also differ from the mainstream productions audiences in that The Junction offers an “experimental” approach to Shakespeare’s plays. The performances do not have to be traditional, and respectively the texts might be trimmed, the chronology of plots disturbed, music as well as the costumes are not required (optional), characters may be added or omitted and so on. A very good example is the production of *Macbeth* directed by Liz Hadaway and staged at The Junction in 2017.<sup>37</sup> The performance was financially supported by local companies and The United Arab Emirates Ministry of Culture & Knowledge Development. The show was an interactive adaptation of the play with the audience following the actors from the stage of the theatre through an outside promenade. The audience was invited and even expected to freely

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37 There were three shows presented in Abu Dhabi, Ajman and Dubai.

roam within “the world of the play to explore the space.” As the playbill informs: “Each audience member will see the story from a unique perspective. Your story will depend on the choices which you make.” There were twenty-five multinational, usually amateur, actresses (including Emirati artists) playing diverse roles with a vast representation of eleven dancing, whispering and shouting witches on the stage(s). The performance gathered a big audience that was actively contributing to the show; however, according to Goenka, the spectators were somehow lost during the production. Due to the fact that some parts of the original play were excluded, and the location of the scenes was changing too rapidly people were not able to follow the plot. Considering the above, it was recognized by The Junction as a partial success. However, the show was an attention-grabbing attempt to stage Shakespeare in an unconventional way and Dubai audience reacted with assent. Another example of an “experimental” Shakespeare introduced by The Junction was *Shakespeare in the Sands* project, which was to popularize filmed versions of all the Bard’s plays recorded by The Globe Theatre. The viewers definitely rejected the idea and after just two screenings with an almost empty auditorium the show was abandoned and finally cancelled. However, The Junction did not give up Shakespeare. Instead, in 2018, they proposed modern and highly avant-garde local community production based on two of the most popular Bard’s plays, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* under a title *Enter Macbeth*<sup>38</sup> directed by Meghana Mundkur with a cast of fifteen people. Scott Campbell in his promotional article “Shakespeare mash-up *Enter Macbeth* is coming to Dubai” (*Times Out Dubai* 2018) described:

The hilarious production *Enter Macbeth* is coming to Dubai, and there are a whole load of surprises in store. The production – based on two of the most popular of the Bard’s plays, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* – features a director on the cast, an Arabic Macbeth, guest appearances by Voldemort and Darth Vader as well as a whole lot of other chaos. With a principal character missing and half the cast on the verge of revolt, they must take drastic measures to keep the script from being shelved and the set from going dark. With the cast

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38 Campbell, S. 2018. Time out Dubai. Shakespeare mash-up *Enter Macbeth* is coming to Dubai. Accessed April 12, 2020. <https://www.timeoutdubai.com/culture/theatre/387135-shakespeare-mash-up-enter-macbeth-is-coming-to-dubai>.

grasping at straws to keep their numbers even, they soon resort to recruiting from other scripts in Shakespeare's First Folio, hoping that doing so will bring an end to all their problems. Little do they suspect what further doom awaits – and it all makes for a hilarious evening. (Campbell, 2018)

The description of *Enter Macbeth* gave an actual idea of this interactive performance, which indeed was a comical exemplum of playing with Shakespearean dramas in order to achieve an experimental, creative effect of the classics. Interestingly, the production was a success, as Goenka claimed (Gautam Goenka, 2020, personal communication) over one hundred young spectators of multicultural backgrounds attended the shows each evening (three days of shows) and the audience was delighted. The producer and creative consultant of the production, Asad Raza Khan, stated:

These days, people want to be entertained and that is what we are giving to them.... We want to make the Bard presentable, accessible, and interesting for all ages including kids. We aim to perhaps create some sort of interest in his works, via what we are doing here. In any case, you can expect a crazy fun night at the theater. (Khan qtd. in Campbell, 2018)

## Conclusion

Dubai, an oriental huge city that consists of the nationalities and cultures from all over the world, is a specific scene for Shakespeare. One must take into consideration the cultural diversity of the prospective spectators, local customs, social conduct, and respect of the local regulations. Not every one of Shakespeare's performances fits the needs and the expectations of Dubai theatergoers. The cultural differences sometimes make it impossible to accept the Western perspective Shakespeare is associated with as, obviously, not all the Bard's images, themes and motifs are universal and appealing everywhere in the world. Shakespeare's dramas may be recognized and globally well known; however, Shakespeare may not be transferable to every single culture. Dubai's Muslim tradition, customs, beliefs in addition to specific multicultural population of various cultural backgrounds may be a good case in point.

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