

SPEECH FOR TANG XIANZU SHAKESPEARE FORUM

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It seems strange to note after this ground-breaking year, but it is true that Shakespeare is a relatively new phenomenon in China. It was only in the 1920's that the first full translations of the plays were made.

The first Shakespeare play to be staged in China was in fact *The Merchant of Venice* in 1902.

What is also interesting is '*the legend of the pound of flesh*' occurs frequently in Chinese literature as well, and is probably imported from the same Hindu myth that Merchant is based on. Our cultural roots are far more similar than we may have imagined.

And the RSC first performed in the country in 2002, when few foreign performances of Shakespeare were available to be seen in Beijing.

It is therefore fantastic to see how much China has embraced Shakespeare this year, only 14 years later and 400 years since the playwright's death, allowing us to enter a new, shared dialogue about our different cultures and ideas.

A year, of course, that began with a series of performances by the RSC, with productions of *Henry IV and V*. And I know there are still a few events remaining, with The English Concert's *Shakespeare in Love* performances later this month in Wuhan, also supported by the British Council.

It was also good to see one of our greatest Shakespearean actors, Ian McKellen enjoy his visit to China so much. I've just been in Russia, and seen there what an extraordinary impact and how many local friends he was able to meet. I know his visit here to promote Shakespeare's legacy was just as significant, as one of the images of his visits to China became the most re-tweeted image in the history of our organisation.

But what really fascinates me, and what is so important for the long term cultural relationships between our countries, is the exchange of ideas and practice - such as the RSC and Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre's collaboration on a new production of *Henry V* as part of their ten year cultural exchange collaboration that started this year.

Around the world, Shakespeare has opened doors this year. The Globe's internationally touring production of *Hamlet* visited every country, playing to a huge worldwide audience.

Shakespeare has been at the heart of cultural diplomacy since the founding of the British Council more than eighty years ago and the very first British Council-supported theatre project was a European tour by the Old Vic company in 1939. Though it has to be said, we do things very differently now – its very much about sharing ideas and understanding one another. We are just as interested in you, as we think you are in us. Hence the People to People dialogues.

Education has been a huge part of the year too, with a Massive Online course available all around the world in partnership with Shakespeare Birthplace Trust exploring the universal themes in some of the most well-known plays. Meanwhile, just last week we celebrated Shakespeare Lives in Schools Day on the second of December with a series of films created by school children responding to different scenes.

One project that has most stood out for me this year, however, is not to do with China-UK, but a collaboration between Graeae Theatre Company in the UK and Dhaka Theatre in Bangladesh. Jenny Sealey, the Artistic Director of Graeae and of the Paralympic Games opening ceremony in 2012, worked with a group of young disabled adults in Dhaka to create their own interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet*. Together they worked to tackle the marginalisation of disabled people, to offer audiences a new experience and to make theatre in Bangladesh more inclusive.

I think this is a shining example of the power of Shakespeare - to create pathways for people to experience theatre and to reflect on the issues that surround us.

However, the year in China has also been large in our thoughts, as the various artistic reports have come in from my colleague Nick Marchand (Director Arts in China) – ever more enthusiastic about the response from our Chinese audiences and the relationships that have been started, experiences experienced, and lives transformed.

Graham Sheffield, Director Arts, British Council