

WORLDS

ELSEWHERE

JOURNEYS

Around

SHAKESPEARE'S

GLOBE



Andrew Dickson



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Prologue

The theatre was packed, people jostling for position. As I watched, three men detached themselves from the crowd and began slowly to climb the steps. A ripple of applause washed over them as they came up on to the stage. Acknowledging it, they glanced around – surprised, bemused to find themselves here in the flat grey light of an English summer afternoon. They were decently dressed, if perhaps a little shabby: long *perahan* tunics in grey and mud-brown, loose trousers, jackets, rubber sandals. Orange security lanyards flapped at their necks. They carried bags; one had a rug slung across his arm. They looked fresh off the plane, and dusty with tiredness.

They settled themselves down, cross-legged, on one side of the stage. Ceremonially, the rug was laid out. The carry-on bags disgorged a series of unlikely objects: a small drum, a case of wooden flutes, a much larger rug. One of the men unzipped what looked like a violin case and produced an Afghan lute, the colour of fresh honey, bristling with pegs and frets. After a few lazy skitterings up the fingerboard, he glanced towards his colleagues. The crowd hushed. Somewhere nearby, there was a brief splash of birdsong. Quietly, insistently, the musicians began to play.

It was June 2012, and I had come to the Globe theatre in London. The company were called Rah-e-Sabz ('Path to Hope'), and they were from Afghanistan; they were about to perform a version of *The Comedy of Errors* translated into Dari Persian. The performance was part of a festival of global Shakespeare, scheduled to coincide with the Olympic Games. Performers from Brazil, Iraq, Tunisia, South Africa, Poland, Turkey, China, Spain, Zimbabwe – nearly fifty countries, all told – had been invited to bring productions to Britain. It was the largest jamboree of its kind in history. Cantonese, Armenian, Bengali, Castilian Spanish, Palestinian Arabic: the plays had been translated into a tumult of

languages, many of which had barely been heard on British stages and certainly not in dramas by Shakespeare.

The Comedy of Errors was a brave choice, and not just for a company that had only been in existence a few years and never visited the UK. The text is a notoriously tall order. Two sets of identical twins (two masters, two servants) find themselves separated by a shipwreck. One pair end up in Ephesus (in present-day Turkey) – set up home, settle down. The master marries, the servant gets engaged. Life goes on. Little do they know that their brothers have set off from Syracuse (present-day Sicily) in search of them and have just arrived in town. For the Sicilian twins all hell breaks loose: people they have never met keep recognising them, tradesmen turn up with goods they haven't ordered. Mysterious women sidle up, claiming to share intimate histories. For the Turkish ones, it's nearly as bad: everyone in town suddenly seems to have gone crazy. Not realising they are constantly being mistaken for their twins, all four fear they are bewitched or – worse – going mad.

For most of its history on stage in the west, *The Comedy of Errors* – perhaps one of Shakespeare's first plays, written in the early 1590s – has been dismissed as an apprentice piece, a creaky and mechanistic farce in the mode of the Roman comedian Plautus, on whose work it was based. Even nowadays it is still a rarity, especially compared to more popular comedies such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *As You Like It*. British and American directors fight shy of its rampant improbabilities, its strenuously Elizabethan wordplay, its corny sight gags (and how does one even go about *casting* two sets of twins?).

But as I watched Rah-e-Sabz perform with their three musicians, notionally setting the play in contemporary Kabul, I saw something quite new. The word 'comedy' was in the title, but it had escaped me how rueful *The Comedy of Errors* was; how much it dwelt on exile, separation. I'd forgotten altogether the character of Egeon, father to two of the twins, who prior to the action has been searching the world for five years, frantic to find his absent sons. He, too, arrives in Ephesus/Kabul and is brusquely arrested for being an illegal immigrant, then placed on death row (here by a female officer in the uniform of the corrupt, western-backed Afghan national police force).

There was farce aplenty, a joyous amount of yelling and chasing around with brooms, but much else seemed fraught. The visiting twins, Antipholus (renamed Arsalan) and Dromio (Bostan), were given

an extended Laurel-and-Hardy sequence in which they were required to swap clothes – something that produced hoots in the audience but also had the sinister implication that it was too dangerous to stay as they were. Arsalan was played by the actor Abdul Haq as a lugubrious, haunted-looking character, in flight from something grim in his past. I had to consult the copy of the script on my knee to remind myself what he was saying during a soliloquy in act one, but what I read made me catch my breath:

He that commends me to mine own content
 Commends me to the thing I cannot get.
 I to the world am like a drop of water
 That in the ocean seeks another drop,
 Who, falling there to find his fellow forth,
 Unseen, inquisitive, confounds himself.
 So I, to find a mother and a brother,
 In quest of them, unhappy, lose myself.

There was laughter as he spoke the lines, but a soft murmur went around a group of Persian-speaking women standing in the yard in front of me; recognition, perhaps.

Rah-e-Sabz's space at the British Council in Kabul had been destroyed in a suicide-bomb attack the previous year; they'd had to rehearse in Bangalore. The actor playing Egeon's wife, Parwin Mushtahel, now lived in Canada, forced into exile after her husband was murdered because she dared perform in public. Nobody here needed reminding what it felt like to lose yourself, thousands of miles away from the people you loved.

The company's work had been held up as a brave example of how theatre could fight back against religious fundamentalism: it was that, certainly. It was also an example of how Shakespeare's plays could take root in places geographically and ideologically remote from those of sixteenth-century England (though, one could argue, not *that* remote: the Taliban had plenty in common with the Puritans who detested Elizabethan theatre).

But as we worked towards the conclusion of *The Comedy of Errors*, as father and mother and brothers, separated for so long, hugged each other disbelievingly, it occurred to me that there was something else, too. This story of journeys, mistakes, confusions, misplaced identities

– being in a strange land, trying to know and comprehend its culture, finding both less and more than you ever imagined – asked a question so often asked in Shakespeare’s plays. What does it really feel like to travel?

In Britain, no one really seemed sure what to make of the World Shakespeare Festival. After a brief show of interest, many newspapers tired of the novelty of companies from far-flung countries bringing versions of Shakespeare in languages few journalists could understand. Critics trooped out en masse to see the home-grown highlights – a production of *Timon of Athens* at the National Theatre (an almost unheard-of rarity); the Royal Shakespeare Company’s ostensibly ‘African’ *Julius Caesar* (in fact cast entirely in Britain, with actors from a variety of heritages). News correspondents made sure to be there at the Globe for *The Merchant of Venice* by the Israeli company Habima, briefly interrupted by pro-Palestinian protests. Yet although audiences attended in their thousands, some of the other shows that came – *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in Swahili, *The Winter’s Tale* in Yoruba – had barely any reviewers at all.

No doubt logistics were partly responsible: so much else was going on that summer that it was hard to know where to look. But I thought I detected something revealing in the world-weary shrug that greeted much of the World Shakespeare Festival: a very British reluctance to acknowledge that Shakespeare really belongs to anyone else.

It is almost a joke that the British have made our National Poet an integral part of our national identity. More than once, we have voted him one of our Greatest Britons. He is resident deity at the Royal Shakespeare Company and Shakespeare’s Globe, and patron saint of the Royal National Theatre, where a plaque with his name graces the foundation stone of the building. His works have been compulsory on the British National Curriculum since its foundation in the 1980s, and a major part of British education for at least 150 years. In pubs called things like the Shakespeare’s Head and the Shakespeare, we toast him with pints of lukewarm Flowers bitter (logo: the poet’s head), named after the Stratford brewing dynasty that helped build the RSC’s predecessor, the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. (Alas for Little Englanders, Flowers is now owned by the Belgian-Brazilian multinational Anheuser-Busch InBev.)

Shakespeare is a brand as recognisably British as the London Routemaster bus or Queen Elizabeth II's head. Until recently he acted as our financial guarantor: up to 1993, an image of Peter Scheemakers' statue of the poet in Westminster Abbey graced the £20 note, and for many years British cheque-guarantee cards were marked with a hologram of Shakespeare's face. In late 2015, the Home Office revealed designs for a new UK passport. The star, naturally, was William Shakespeare, watermarked on every single page.

Patriotism turns, on occasion, to jingoism. We become defensive when theatre companies from abroad bring their own Shakespeares to these shores. ('We have quite enough gimmicky Shakespeare of our own,' huffed the *Telegraph's* critic of a Brazilian *Richard III*. 'Do we really need to import it?') Numerous Conservative politicians have cited as their favourite lines in literature the St Crispin's Day speech in *Henry V*, which precedes the glorious trampling of the French at the Battle of Agincourt. Guests on one of the BBC's most-loved interview programmes, *Desert Island Discs*, are – once they have selected the eight pieces of music that would accompany them to a deserted and exotic location – informed that they will also be issued with the complete works of Shakespeare and the Bible by default, for all the world as if they were nineteenth-century missionaries. Simply to get into the BBC studio, they have to pass beneath Eric Gill's sculpture of Prospero and Ariel, which stands on the facade of Broadcasting House in central London.

The cult attains a discomfiting intensity in Stratford-upon-Avon, centre of what the motorway signs call 'Shakespeare's County', Warwickshire – the symbolic as well as literal heart of England. A few months before watching *Rah-e-Sabz* at the Globe, I went up to Stratford for the annual birthday celebrations, the first time I'd seen them. What I witnessed I found puzzling: a cross between town fete (Morris dancers and decorated floats), militaristic tourist spectacle (cub scouts and the Band of the Royal Engineers) and Bardolatrous seance (volunteers dressed up as Master and Mistress Shakespeare). None of this is especially surprising: the celebrations have their origin in the tub-thumpingly patriotic 'Shakespeare Jubilee' of 1769 masterminded by the great actor-manager David Garrick, which – among many bizarre pieces of pageantry – featured the ritual humiliation of a 'Frenchman' followed by a passionate avowal of Shakespeare's flinty Britishness. What any of it has to do with an early-modern playwright is exceedingly hard to tell.

Even Shakespeare's birthday seems, the closer one looks, like a

way of burnishing the patriotic myth. It has become conventional to celebrate it on 23 April. Yet the records are unclear, and no one knows for sure that William Shakespeare *was* born on 23 April – he might just as easily have come into this world on the 21st or the 22nd. But 23 April is St George’s Day, the patron saint of England. So 23 April the anointed day has become.

Later that summer I sat down to watch the Olympic opening ceremony, broadcast from the stadium a couple of miles from my home in east London. Its contents had been kept rigorously secret; all I or anyone else knew was that Danny Boyle, a sometime theatre director, had chosen the theme of ‘Isles of Wonder’, a nod to *The Tempest* and Team GB’s very own world-beating Bard.

With an estimated 900 million others, I watched scenes of Maypolers cavorting on the greensward and cricketers running up to bowl. I looked on, a little more apprehensively, as choirs of children from across the British Isles piped their way through ‘Jerusalem’, ‘Danny Boy’, ‘Flower of Scotland’ and ‘Guide me, O Thou Great Redeemer’. Where *was* this Shakespearian theme we had all been promised? Was this meant to be it?

Then the actor Kenneth Branagh strode forward, in waistcoat and stovepipe as the nineteenth-century engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel, and declaimed, to the swelling strains of Elgar’s ‘Nimrod’, a speech many can recite from memory:

Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises,
 Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.
 Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
 Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices
 That if I then had waked after long sleep
 Will make me sleep again; and then in dreaming
 The clouds methought would open and show riches
 Ready to drop on me, that when I waked
 I cried to dream again.

Words spoken by an oppressed and imprisoned slave, Caliban, in a play, *The Tempest*, that dwells at length on the costs and consequences of colonialism, were being repurposed as a eulogy for the British Empire, placed above music by Edwardian England’s most patriotic composer and replayed for the watching world.

As I flicked off the television, I wondered if I would ever discover how Britain had acquired such a curious, conflicted attitude to its National Poet.

Of the numerous things odd about this, the most obvious one is that there was never anything especially British about William Shakespeare.

Granted, if one plots the known facts of his life on a map, the route runs from Warwickshire to London and back again, not far from what is now the M40 motorway corridor. Born in Stratford-upon-Avon, educated at a grammar school a few streets away from his birthplace, Shakespeare married a local girl and had three children with her. By the early 1590s he was in London, a hundred miles south-east. Even the capital seems to have been a temporary halt: Shakespeare never bought a permanent residence there, preferring to acquire property back home in Warwickshire, where he retired (scholars guess) a few years before his death. He was buried in April 1616, in the same town as his forefathers, and the same church where he had been baptised fifty-two years earlier.

A few adventurous biographers have detected glimpses of the playwright in Lancashire (in the so-called 'lost years' between the birth of his twins in 1585 and the first record of him as a playwright in 1592), but the traces are spotty and unconvincing. Even more unconvincing are legends that Shakespeare travelled in continental Europe, perhaps as a soldier: no evidence whatsoever. It is equally feasible that he never went further north than the Midlands, or further south than the London borough of Southwark. In London, one can still pace out his daily commute: from the parish of St Helen's, Bishopsgate, near Liverpool Street station, down through the City and across London Bridge, past Southwark cathedral (then St Mary Overie) to the Globe or the Rose, perhaps with detours via the bookstalls around St Paul's or to Clerkenwell, where scripts were approved by the Master of the Revels. At most, the area covers a few square miles.

But while his physical existence was cramped and confined, Shakespeare's imagination roamed far and free. Taking advantage of the worlds opened up by a grammar-school education and the Elizabethan explosion in publishing (especially travel publishing), he made innumerable voyages of discovery.

Via the historians Halle and Holinshed, he trod the bloody territory of his own country through the Middle Ages and beyond, filling out

their chronicle accounts with a cacophony of Welsh, Scottish and French voices. Despite Ben Jonson's gibe about his older colleague's 'smalle Latin and lesse Greeke', Shakespeare raided classical sources with magpie enthusiasm, reading Ovid and Virgil in the original and English translation, and exhibiting an impressive knowledge of Roman comedy and the tragedies of Seneca. He scoured Plutarch's *Lives* – in a version that had been translated via French – for the traces of Caesar, Coriolanus, Cleopatra and Antony on their journeys through the ancient world. The sonnets and narrative poems show the heavy imprint of Dante and Petrarch. On his shelves at various times were copies of Montaigne's *Essais*, collections of Italian and French tales (some read in their original languages) and accounts of journeys around North Africa and the Mediterranean and to the Americas.

Little wonder the plays Shakespeare wrote bestride the world. His characters hail from Tunisia, the Levant, Algeria, India; his dramatic imagination roams restlessly across France, Denmark, Austria, Turkey, Greece, covering a veritable gazetteer of far-flung destinations. He has a particular passion for Italy: Padua (*The Taming of the Shrew*), Venice (*The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*), Verona (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Romeo and Juliet*), Sicily (*Much Ado About Nothing*); and, behind it, for ancient Rome (*Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, parts of *Antony and Cleopatra*).

In fact, he seems actively to have avoided writing about the Britain of his own lifetime: the plays Shakespeare does locate in the British Isles are either distanced by time (the English histories) or by theme (the ancient Britain of *King Lear*, feudal Scotland in *Macbeth*, the Roman invasion-era *Cymbeline*). In arresting contrast to born-and-bred Londoners such as Ben Jonson, Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton, whose plays place on stage the city in which they lived and breathed, Shakespeare sets only one full script, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, in anything resembling the Elizabethan world he knew.

On a microscopic level, too, the scripts are littered with tiny but telling references to what Coriolanus calls 'a world elsewhere'. *Macbeth's* Witches make fleeting mention of the disastrous far-Eastern voyage of the *Tiger*, one of whose shipmates went on to found the East India Company; *Henry V's* prologue glances at the Earl of Essex's campaign in Ireland; *Love's Labour's Lost* pokes sly fun at the inept diplomacy of Ivan the Terrible. Hamlet frets that his fortunes will 'turn Turk'. In *Measure for Measure* we hear gossip about 'China dishes'. The 'Indies' – in Shakespeare's time America as well as the Indian subcontinent and Indonesia – make a

fleeting appearance in several texts, notably *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where Oberon and Titania wage a fairy-tale war over an enigmatic boy 'stolen from an Indian king'. No fewer than five plays – *Dream*, *Henry VI Part III*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Richard II* – mention that remotest location of all from England, the 'Antipodes'.

Shakespeare was not merely indulging his own curiosity about worlds elsewhere (or those of his audiences); as scholars have recently begun to understand, he reflected the world as it was changing around him. Though England lagged far behind colonial powers such as Spain and Portugal, international trade had begun to make its presence felt by the end of the sixteenth century, particularly in London, where the Royal Exchange became a nexus for merchants from across the globe. In 1600, the East India Company was founded to capitalise on the spice routes through Arabia and towards Asia, while other joint-stock companies soon thrust west towards the Americas. In 1603 the Scottish James I took the throne, accompanied by his Danish queen, Anne, ushering in a new, more geopolitically open era after the combative defensiveness of the Elizabethan period.

As well as experiencing this first upsurge in global trade – spices, silks, tobacco, exotic foodstuffs – Shakespeare and other Londoners jostled among a melting pot of immigrants, including people from the Jewish diaspora, Spanish 'blackamoors', former slaves from North and West Africa and religious refugees from the European continent. Simply by strolling down to the docks or around St Paul's, nicknamed 'the whole world's map' by one contemporary writer, the playwright could have heard half the languages of Europe. The expansion of British influence is attested to by the extraordinary fact that in the summer of 1603, around the time Shakespeare was writing *Othello*, a small clutch of Native Americans were shipped across from Chesapeake Bay and ordered to paddle their canoe up the Thames for the amusement of spectators.

Shakespeare (who, as a Warwickshireman, was himself an alien of sorts) seems to have been particularly intimate with the city's expatriates. As well as reading French and Italian, he knew people who could correct his grammar: from around 1602 he lived with the family of a French Huguenot refugee, Christopher Mountjoy, and his wife in Bishopsgate in the City of London, an area known for the diversity of its residents, teeming with Flemish, Dutch and French families. He was apparently on nodding terms with the Italian translator of Montaigne,

John Florio, and perhaps acquainted with the Bassanos, a family of Italian Jewish musicians. One thinks of Bob Dylan's lines in 'Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again':

Well, Shakespeare, he's in the alley
With his pointed shoes and his bells
Speaking to some French girl . . .

Footwear notwithstanding, they are accurate enough: not only did Shakespeare know at least one 'French girl', Christopher and Marie Mountjoy's daughter Mary, he acted as a go-between in her marriage to a young apprentice (and later testified in a lawsuit regarding it).

Soon after moving in with the Mountjoys, in 1603, Shakespeare for the first time became a royal servant, putting him into contact with visitors not only from mainland Europe but from far beyond. Ambassadors and tourists from elsewhere in Europe came to see his plays at the public theatres; at court, meanwhile, his newly renamed King's Men played more often than any other company, including for foreign dignitaries.

If Jaques is right to suggest in *As You Like It* that 'all the world's a stage' – the phrase is held to be the motto of the original Globe – then the stage was also a way of reflecting the world back at these increasingly diverse audiences. The Swiss doctor Thomas Platter, who came to London as a tourist in 1599 and witnessed the first-known performance of *Julius Caesar*, claimed that the theatre was the means by which Londoners found out what was happening abroad: 'the English,' Platter remarked, 'for the most part do not travel much, but prefer to learn foreign matters . . . at home.'

There were more literal voyages, too. Rummaging in early production history, I came across a tale frequently repeated in accounts of Shakespeare and the world beyond British shores. It seems almost too good to be true, offering a tantalising connection between the East India Company, the globalising currents beginning to flow through London, and Shakespeare. In March 1607 – the same year the playwright might have begun work on *Pericles* – a vessel called the *Red Dragon* weighed anchor at Tilbury and headed into the North Sea. Commanded by the young captain William Keeling, the *Dragon* was the flagship of the Company's third voyage to the Far East. Keeling's destination was Java in Indonesia; he had orders to buy as many spices

as could be squeezed into his hold and open trade negotiations for the English in India and Aden, at the tip of the Arabian peninsula.

Things went badly for the *Dragon* almost from the off. Foul weather split up the convoy of three ships, and a man was swept overboard. Another crew member was found enjoying what a ship's diarist called 'carnall copulation' with a dog, and whipped at the mainmast. A lack of reliable maps created navigational headaches, and despite being bound for the east via the Cape of Good Hope, the *Dragon* and her smaller companion the *Hector* were driven south-west, and ended up crossing the equator near Brazil, the wrong side of the Atlantic altogether, in June. 'Inforced by Gusts, Calmes, Raines, Sicknesses, and other Marine inconveniences', they ended up recrossing it a month later. Water was running low; dysentery and scurvy were rife. Desperate to save his voyage, Keeling hit upon the idea of heading for the coast of Africa, to repair and refuel. They finally reached a Portuguese trading outpost in Sierra Leone in early August.

What they did there was unusual, even by the standards of the voyage so far. While the captain and his colleagues amused themselves by going on an elephant hunt – they managed to wound the creature but not kill it – Keeling's diary records that his crew indulged a taste for more surprising entertainment while moored in Sierra Leone: drama. On the morning of 5 September, he writes, in biscuit-dry, matter-of-fact prose:

I sent the interpreter, according to his deseir, aboard the *Hector*, wear he brooke fast, and after came aboard mee [the *Dragon*], where we gave the tragedy of Hamlett.

Three thousand miles and half a world away from Shakespeare's Globe, so it seems, the ship's crew put on a performance of one of Shakespeare's plays. Three weeks later, on 29 September, this devoted cast of amateurs added *Richard II* to their shipboard repertoire. To compound the feat, they gave a repeat performance of *Hamlet* the following March, by then off the east coast of Africa in the Gulf of Aden, near what is now Yemen.

If these accounts are correct, these would be not only the first performances of *Hamlet* and *Richard II* outside Europe, but, in the case of *Hamlet*, also the first public performance it is possible to pinpoint. In other words, the earliest moment anyone would be able to locate this English play about a German-educated, Danish prince (itself a collage of classical

learning and Icelandic sagas, translated from French) is when it surfaces in West Africa, in front of a polyglot audience that included a Temne-born, Portuguese-speaking interpreter who had converted to Catholicism and at least three other Sierra Leoneans. For anyone interested in the idea of Shakespeare as a global writer, the story is almost too tempting to resist.

For as much of the summer of 2012 as I could, I sat in theatres, going on my own voyages of discovery. I watched, awestruck and a little perplexed, as the Ngākau Toa group from Auckland performed an epic, Maori-language *Troilus and Cressida*, complete with strutting *haka* war dance. I saw the great Catalan director Calixto Bieito's desolate reimaging of Shakespeare's pastoral universe, *Forests*, which was acted out on a mound of earth beneath a stricken tree like something out of *Waiting for Godot*. I was overwhelmed by *King Lear* as reinterpreted by the Belarus Free Theatre, who are forced to perform in exile because of their opposition to the Minsk government. Their version of the play was a grim, sardonic folk tale, nonetheless full of heart for a country going to the dogs.

I realised what I had often felt in a decade of watching British performances of Shakespeare: boredom. We had a cosy attitude to Shakespeare in this country, a way of taking him for granted. We regarded him pre-eminently as one of us; no one did him so well. He had helped define the British theatre tradition, and we repaid him by acting as if that tradition was something we had no interest in escaping. We had entrenched ideas not only about our superior grasp of Shakespeare's language, but the way those words should be pronounced – a combination of Mummerset and the emollient Received Pronunciation that has been standard practice in British drama schools since the beginning of the twentieth century.

Yet in translation, so it appeared to me, the plays had a habit of wriggling free. There seemed to be something about being liberated from Shakespeare's own language that allowed theatre-makers to approach his work with quizzical freshness, to unearth themes and ideas that many British companies, drilled in certain modes of thinking and performing, would never have dared to. These visitors seemed to have found things in the plays that we rarely glimpsed, even in multicultural, twenty-first-century Britain. The renegade Russian

director Dmitry Krymov made *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It* into an anarchic mash-up, complete with teetering, five-metre-high puppets. An Indian company transformed *All's Well That Ends Well*, newly translated into Gujarati, into *bhangwadi*, a popular theatre form that blossomed in Mumbai in the late nineteenth century ('bhang' is hash). Deliciously enjoyable, it bore little relation to the hard-edged interpretations of this 'problem' comedy usually on offer in the west.

Standing in the yard at the Globe or the foyer of the Barbican arts centre, surrounded by people talking many different languages – newly arrived tourists; first-, second- and third-generation immigrants; fluent speakers alongside people who had just a smattering – I realised that this Shakespeare felt thrillingly different. And I, a white, male, Cambridge-educated, English-speaking critic who was supposed to know about Shakespeare, barely knew him at all.

Idling away those summer afternoons and evenings, watching planes on final approach to Heathrow glint through the skies above the Globe, I thought with increasing seriousness about following some of these threads in the opposite direction. Seeing shows was all well and good, but I wanted to go deeper, to examine how Shakespeare had infiltrated literature, education, movies, dance, visual art. What context did the productions I'd been watching, and productions like them, come from? What did Shakespeare actually mean in Seoul, or Bangalore, or Ramallah, or Dar es Salaam? How had he ended up in these places? We were endlessly told that he was the world's most performed playwright, its most translated secular author – but why? Why *was* Shakespeare, a writer who barely travelled, so popular globally? And why had he been not only adapted, but also adopted, in so many countries worldwide?

Global Shakespeare was in the process of becoming a fashionable academic discipline, but the studies I read were in torrid disagreement. Some argued for the universalising force of Shakespeare's writing, its ability to transcend any barrier of colour, class or creed. Others suggested the shadowy postcolonial obverse of this vision – that the reason a dead, white writer was so inescapable was a by-product of the British Empire and its educational factory farms, which turned out dutiful colonial servants who could quote *Hamlet* as readily as recite the Lord's Prayer.

Other scholars knowingly quoted globalisation theory: the Bard as a trans-national brand, or as an example of what the Polish

sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has termed 'liquid modernity', part of the free-flowing, ideas-based economy of the global web. More practically, some cited the inexorable global expansion of English, and the remorseless growth of TEFL courses; if one were studying the English language, who better to study than that language's Top Poet? Was it even a *good* thing that – as the British Council claimed – half the world's kids studied Shakespeare in some form or other? Wasn't this cultural imperialism in the guise of cultural relations?

No single explanation seemed satisfactory. I yearned to get away from theorising. I bought a world map, and began to pepper it with dots. Replica Globe theatres in Cedar City, Utah; Neuss, Germany; Jukkasjärvi, Sweden (the globe's northernmost Globe, carved from ice). Kimberley in South Africa, birthplace of the first black Shakespeare translator in Africa. The dacha outside Moscow where Boris Pasternak translated *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. The theatre village near Saitama set up by Japan's most prolific Shakespearian director. The Polish tombstone of Ira Aldridge, the African-American actor who became the nineteenth century's most famous Othello. Points of contact, connection.

I began pestering theatre producers and academic contacts for phone numbers and email addresses; wangling invitations to festivals and conferences, anything that could make a trip worthwhile. I researched flights, and bought the most lightweight copy of the complete works I could find (the venerable Peter Alexander 1951 edition, no notes and recently reprinted in paperback, 1.2 kilogrammes). I kept on reading – books on Asian performance, Zulu adaptations, eighteenth-century French translations, stagings in the post-conflict Balkans: more Shakespeares than I had ever encountered, and rather more than I knew what to do with.

An early plan to track down Rah-e-Sabz to Kabul hit a wall when it transpired that the company, conjoined by Shakespearian comedy, had broken up; one of the actors had claimed asylum in Germany, and others had turned their backs on the group, driven apart by the relentless pressures of touring. After much anguish, I reluctantly laid Russia aside, despite its long and honourable Shakespearian history (which encompassed, impressively, a version of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* supposedly by Catherine the Great). I didn't have the cash for both Japan and China: I plumped for China, persuaded by absorbing stories I'd read about the vexed and illuminating relationship between Shakespeare and communism. I certainly didn't have the cash to visit Sweden, even if the

Ice Globe had still been standing (it turned out to have been a tourist stunt and had lasted only a few months, a decade ago).

Nonetheless, a route began to assemble itself, hewn from the chaos. Not one journey, but a series of journeys; explorations, perhaps, or pilgrimages. I had already seen a fair amount of theatre in Germany, where Shakespeare has been regarded as an honorary citizen since the late eighteenth century, and where English actors visited even earlier. It would be fascinating to return, and trace the trail to its beginning. I could return, too, to the United States, in search of how Shakespeare became a popular household name there in the nineteenth century. Then India, where there were now reckoned to be more cinematic adaptations of the plays than anywhere else in the world, in nearly every Indian language one could name. Then South Africa, where the plays had come head to head with the brute realities of race and racism, perhaps more so than anywhere else on the globe. I would end – if I was still, unlike Rah-e-Sabz, in one piece – in China, where Shakespeare's works had arrived only a century ago, but where he was now so popular (so I read) that there were many times more schoolchildren learning the plays in Mandarin translation than there were in Britain and America studying the English originals.

Five journeys, five acts; the same number, I was pleased to realise, as a play. This expedition into global Shakespeare wouldn't be anywhere near completist, even in the countries I visited – such a thing was surely unachievable – but it made incursions into four continents and at least nine languages (none of which I really spoke). It was daunting and, like all daunting things, also wildly exhilarating. From agonising about how much I was having to miss out, I began to get excited by the possibilities, by the collisions and reverberations my route might set up – through places and cultures that wound across and around each other, back to Britain, out again to locations much further afield.

On a brief trip to an arts festival in St Petersburg, a way of salving my conscience for spurning Russia, I told a director what I was planning to do: an impossible quest, I knew, but . . .

Unlike most British people I'd spoken to, who expressed bafflement at the idea of chasing Shakespearian apparitions across the world, he didn't seem remotely fazed. 'There will be many Shakespeares,' he said with the gnomic solemnity special to Russian theatre directors. 'You must let them be unrecognisable.'

There was one conundrum to resolve before I went: the dot on my map next to the coast of Sierra Leone, the site of those supposed performances of *Hamlet* and *Richard II* in 1607. *Had* the plays really been performed on board ship by a company of English sailors in the roiling West African heat, within Shakespeare's lifetime?

I arranged my first expedition, to the British Library in London. It emerged that only a fragment of the hundred-page journal of William Keeling, the 'generall' of the *Dragon*, survives, in the archives of the East India Company. All that exists is a single page, badly torn. It covers an early part of the voyage, March and April, when the ship had still been wallowing across the Atlantic. No mention of Sierra Leone, still less of Shakespeare.

Sections of the Keeling journal had been printed by an editor called Samuel Purchas in 1625, in a huge, five-volume anthology called *Purchas his Pilgrimes*, stuffed with tales of English naval derring-do. Finding the Keeling diaries 'very voluminous', Purchas explained that he had been so bold as to edit them 'to express only the most necessary observations for sea or land affairs'. Again, no Shakespeare. The diary entries relating to *Hamlet* and *Richard II* had only been picked up much later, in the nineteenth century, by an East India Company clerk, one Thomas Rundall, who – not apparently thinking them especially interesting – printed a transcription in the appendix of another compendium of English sea voyages. That was in 1849; it was another two decades before anyone noticed them and realised what they could mean. The story didn't become more widely circulated until the 1920s, when it was taken as stirring proof that British sailors had transported English culture to the furthest ends of civilisation.

The problem was this: by then the evidence itself had long since vanished. The East India Company was notorious for throwing out its early records; indeed, when it became the India Office in 1858, a 'Destruction Committee' had been formed to do exactly that. That single page excepted, the original Keeling diary had disappeared at some point between 1625 and the late nineteenth century. Two journals from the 1607–08 voyage of the *Dragon* are extant, overflowing with colourful detail about the journey – the dates match and the elephant-hunting expedition is there – but neither makes any mention of shipboard theatricals. Neither does an abbreviated contemporaneous copy of Keeling's journal, and there are no other records of English sailors staging drama in this period. Though some scholars have staked

reputations on the story of *Hamlet* and *Richard II* on the *Dragon*, the growing consensus is that it simply doesn't add up. In the absence of better evidence, the best guess is that it is a particularly malicious forgery. I asked a curator; was it possible the missing diary could turn up somewhere in the nine miles of shelving that contained India Office records? Her expression told me not to hold my breath.

I sat there in the reading room, working methodically through references and articles, returning every so often to the Keeling manuscript: a single sheet of leathery paper, the colour of silt. It looked unbearably fragile, like a Roman or Etruscan object entombed for thousands of years and only recently prised from the loam. Trying to remember the palaeography lessons I had been forced to do as a postgraduate student, I peered closely at the page, willing it to turn up something new. The tight-knit Jacobean secretary script was cussed and dense, the paper pocked with a shrapnel of holes. I could pick out fragments – 'the Consent sett sayle from Tilbury', 'being bound for London' – but little overall narrative. The text cascaded down and down, before being enveloped by a long, juddering tear. The final letters were identifiable only by their summits, a few scribbled minims and curves in brownish ink. The rest disappeared into oblivion, as if beneath the waves.

It seemed revealing, I thought as I left the library: whether as nineteenth-century colonialists or twenty-first-century postmoderns, we were keen to find Shakespeare everywhere, even places that bore no trace. It was a useful cautionary tale, one a pilgrim would do well to bear in mind. In any case, the Foreign Office advice on visiting Sierra Leone was none too encouraging because of the bitter aftermath of the long civil war. Whatever the realities of the visit made by the *Dragon*, a visit of my own would have to wait.

Still, it didn't dent my enthusiasm. I'd always been faintly distrustful of travel for its own sake: now, having found a reason to slip away, I could barely wait to be gone. My flights were booked; my diary cleared. I made my excuses to friends and family and put my London life on hold. I was surprised to realise how desperate I'd been for my horizons to be expanded. With the itchy skittishness of all travellers about to embark – somewhere between brittle excitement and plain terror – I suddenly wanted to be on my way.