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Hamlet Globe to Globe: two years, 190,000 miles, 197 countries, one play

Bringing Shakespeare around the world is a tragicomic business. In the 1970s, British poet Anthony Thwaite (b. 1930) wrote a poem for a fundraiser hosted by American actor Sam Wanamaker to help (re)build the Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London. "Girdle Round the Earth" opens by quoting some exam papers from students in Tokyo and Benghazi:

"King Rear was foorish man his girls make crazy"
Says something certainly about the play.
"Prutus fall on sord for bolitical reason"
Is unambiguous, though not the way
We native-speakers might have put it, who share
A language with the undoubted global poet.[1]

In the four decades since Thwaite's mediocre poem, air travel has gotten cheaper, walls have fallen and borders have opened (others have been newly erected or barbed), and the Iron Curtain has been rent asunder. Academic interest in "diversity" has grown, along with interest in decolonizing the academy, provincializing Europe, and studying performance alongside text. Theatre audiences around the world have shrunk and become more conservative, more focused on a handful of hypercanonical authors. Driven by all these factors, Global Shakespeare has morphed from a joke to a flourishing academic subfield. Meanwhile the Globe Theatre on the Thames – offering a safe repertoire, £5.00 groundling tickets, and an endearingly direct scenographic and acting style – has grown from an expat's dream to a beloved tourist magnet and local landmark.

The 2012 Globe-to-Globe Festival built on this success, bringing "37 plays in 37 languages" to London. Free of Thwaite's plummy smugness but still London-centric and structured by rigid national frames, the festival earned some pushback (why couldn't the Pakistani company mix English into their Urdu?) and predictably snarky reviews from some critics and scholars. Yet it occasioned a few interesting artistic collaborations, drew enthusiastic audiences, and pulled large numbers from London's diaspora communities into the theatre.

That festival's afterglow is where Dominic Dromgoole, the Globe's artistic director from 2005 to spring 2016 and self-confessed "gross vulgarian," starts his book *Hamlet Globe to Globe: Two Years, 190,000 Miles, 197 Countries, One Play.* Searching for "another big idea," Dromgoole and colleagues cook up a plan to "take *Hamlet* to every country in the world." Amazingly, it works. With their own packing cases for sets, a company of sixteen actors/stage managers performs a stripped-down *Hamlet* (in English, without translation) everywhere they can go. They get to Albania and Haiti, Laos and Northern Iraq, several refugee camps – and even the South Pacific island of Nauru. They miss North Korea, but not for lack of trying.

This book is Dromgoole's memoir of that journey, sections of which he joined in person. His subtitle conveys the nitpickers-be-damned chutzpah of the enterprise. It also telegraphs how this book should be read: as part rollicking travelogue, part manifesto on theatre's role in public life, and part love letter to Hamlet, both prince and play.

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[1] Thwaite, Anthony, "A Girdle Round the Earth," *Selected Poems: 1956-1996* (London: Enitharmon, 1997). For Thwaite's reminiscence and reading, see https://anthonythwaitepoetry.wordpress.com/2013/08/17/girdle-round-the-earth-thwaites-funny-politically-incorrect-satire-on-shakespeare/ (accessed October 6, 2017).

The book is less compactly planned than the tour. Rather than move chronologically through Dromgoole's deepening experience of the journey and the text, it consists of thematic essays, each sparked by a venue and focused on a crux or theme in *Hamlet*. A verbose official in the garrison town of Djibouti evokes Polonius. A hallucinatory food poisoning episode in Mexico City anchors the chapter on Hamlet's both-feigned-and-real madness. A performance at a co-ed university in Saudi Arabia stirs thoughts of women's rights and an interesting discussion of female actors playing Hamlet. The chapter on revolution (Laertes' "lawless resolutes" and the Earl of Essex) ends up in Ukraine, caught *in medias Maidan,* by way of Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. ("These countries knew about regime change and revolution in their gut," Dromgoole marvels.) The next chapter, "Fighting for Eggshells and Revenge," returns to Kiev, this time noticing the fog of vodka and Kalashnikov-toting teens. A riff on murder – how Shakespeare manages to make us care more about Hamlet's character than the Elsinore bloodbath – introduces a visit to Cambodia, whose reddish earth reminds Dromgoole of the killing fields.

This structure produces some repetitions, a few contrived links, and many a belabored airport *aperçu*. At times it disobeys Dromgoole's own instructions (in another context) to the players: "If it feels like someone is relentlessly screaming, 'Look, parallels! Parallels!' … the honourable path is in the opposite direction." (237) Yet some connections resonate. The free-associative structure also lets us watch Dromgoole's thinking as he turns *Hamlet* to the light, studying the world through the prism of this one rich text. Fortunately, whether in a Taipei nightclub or the Zaatari Syrian refugee camp in Jordan, he is aware of how superficially he knows each place and how privileged he is to travel at all.

A "confirmed agnostic," Dromgoole exults in colorful street scenes, especially street performances, and in earnest conversations, joyful dancing, and the peace offered by (empty) houses of worship. He reacts with old-school English dismay to any attempt to reshape a culture through religious or political ideology, be it Communism or Wahhabi Islam. We watch him visit several genocide museums marking "where the geometry of an idea was forcibly pushed onto the bumps and curves of a country." (151)

More unusually, he feels similarly about directorial vision. It takes "oceans of technique and discipline and rigour," he argues, to present *Hamlet*'s bumps and curves without the fardels of foisted subtext:

> This is hard for many to negotiate, since without a concept, or an argument, they have nothing to talk of afterwards but the play itself, a nudity which they find embarrassing to look at. Our job at the Globe was always to tell the story cleanly, to judge the relationships impartially, and to let the language do the work.

This kind of "simple" performance can be, Dromgoole rightly notes, hard to watch. Yet he records the puzzlement-then-relief of audiences in Sweden and Amsterdam: "Nursed and nurtured as they were on radical deconstructions and conceptual reworkings, the sheer nudity and bareness was a shock."(61) And in Gdansk, veteran Polish filmmaker Andrzej Wajda (1926-2016) "beamed and gasped and chuckled his delight, and was full of straightforward and acute appreciation afterwards." Instead of concept, the Globe company seeks only a space with decent acoustics and the human connection of storytelling. The young actors, depicted as bright and guileless and joyous to the point of naivety, stand in for Dromgoole's idea of touring theatre itself: "the outlaw pleasure of trucking into a place, painting the landscape around you in new and surprising colours, gifting a story, some laughter, and some new thought to a community, and then getting out fast."

Most surprising (but not really), Dromgoole reads his own values back onto Hamlet himself. In Hamlet's lines to Horatio, "As a stranger give it welcome" and even "Let be," Dromgoole finds a Renaissance generosity and a spirit of passive receptivity, honesty, and freedom: "the new civility, the new openness that Hamlet (and for my money Shakespeare) was trying to live." (297) Some readers will not recognize the compulsive quibbler, punster, stage manager, and explainer we know as Hamlet. But so?

It would be churlish to quibble with this baggy, self-indulgent, yet deeply intelligent and charming book. The perspectives it occludes others will fill in; notably, the preconceptions and reactions from these different audiences, seen in a forthcoming study by the Globe's embedded academics, Penelope Woods and Malcolm Cocks. It would also be interesting to see how the Globe's "concept-free" Hamlet intersected with the political dynamics and established theatre cultures of its many staging sites, or whether it just skittered like a passing water strider on their surface. If we are left with these questions, however, it is the Globe's mad venture that has let us ask them at all.