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## Theatre as Heterotopia

Contemporary Comparative Perspectives on Shakespeare



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# Theatre as Heterotopia: Shakespeare's hetero-chrono-topias

Russell West-Pavlov

Borges once remarked of Shakespeare, "No one has ever been so many men as this man who like the Egyptian Proteus could exhaust all the guises of reality."<sup>1</sup> Significantly, the short piece does not explicitly mention the Bard's name until the end of this long description. Borges' fictional evocation of Shakespeare's successive avatars has its more scholarly counterpart in studies such as Gary Taylor's *Reinventing Shakespeare*, which enumerates the many instantiations of Shakespearean drama down the centuries since the Restoration. Taylor's history is also a topology, however, a survey of the many places of performance in which Shakespeare has donned his manifold disguises.

One of Taylor's episodes recounts a performance of *Troilus and Cressida* in East Berlin, at the Berliner Ensemble, in 1986, only three years before the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>2</sup> Performing that play as the GDR approached total bankruptcy and the ambient dissatisfaction among its citizens was no longer able to be contained by the state security apparatus was a theatrical pregnant with implications. Shakespeare's Trojan war had been dragging on for years, with the conflict caught in stalemate, just as the Cold War had coalesced into a political freeze with little prospect for change. The Greek and Trojan warriors met for combat in the no-man's land before the walls of Troy, a space which must have sounded weirdly familiar to the citizens of both Berlins, their city cut through by the concrete wall and its spotlight deathstrip, with shots heard regularly along its wire-and-concrete course. Yet Shakespeare's two forces met on many occasions for the exchange of prisoners or chivalric parleys between warriors on both sides, not unlike the constant traffic between East and West (one of the GDR's largest sources of hard currency was the sale of thousands of political prisoners to the Federal Republic). *Troilus and Cressida* in East Berlin in 1986 was thus a heterotopical performance whose central dramatic topoi resonated loudly with the immediate geopolitical topology of its context of performance.

This particular place of performance is not insignificant for this volume today either. Its team of authors, with the exception of the two Kenyan contributors, are all based in Berlin, albeit in the erstwhile western sector of the post-reunification city where the traces of the wall have all but disappeared. An index of this site of scholarly work embellishes the cover of this volume, in the form of a collage of a street sign on Shakespeare Platz [Shakespeare Square] in Berlin's west-central district of Charlottenburg. The image is multiplied, fragmented, dispersed, in order to suggest the ways in which the sites in which Shakespeare is and has been performed, watched,

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1 Jorge Luis Borges, 'Everything and Nothing', trans. James E. Irby, in *Labyrinths* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 285.

2 Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* (London: Vintage, 1991), 298-300.

read, written about, are multiple, heterogeneous, contradictory, and often in an ambivalent, liminal, partially antagonistic relationship with the establishment and its institutions of or with mainstream societal customs. In short, Shakespeare's places exemplify what Foucault once called "heterotopias": meaning-laden sites which are both part of but somehow on the margins of a society, echoing its discourses and reflecting its self-images but often with an ironic undertone or a distorting twist.<sup>3</sup>

We write from what was once, in every sense of the word, a heterotopia. West Berlin was an enclave of the Federal Republic embedded deep within the Eastern Block. The Western part of the city was surrounded until 1989 by a ring of increasingly impenetrable fortifications which, paradoxically, were designed to keep the outsiders – the citizens of the German Democratic Republic – out of West Berlin, rather than the insiders in. West Berlin was inside the East, and outside the West (West Berliners still refer to the rest of the Federal Republic as "West Germany"), and thus entertained a strongly ambivalent relationship to the body politic of which it was, within the propaganda of European democracy, an indispensable part. Despite its propaganda status all down its turbulent history, Berlin has always been a site of less easily assimilated artistic and cultural innovation – during the ebullient Weimar period, during the counter-culture 1960s-1970s in Kreuzburg and the civic-rights/peace-movement in Prenzlauer Berg, into the alternative-ecological 1980s-1990s, and today in the era of the "creative industries". West Berlin was the one place in the Federal Republic where young men were released from compulsory military service, making it a refuge for alternative thinkers and activists. In 1968 our own institution, the Free University of Berlin, was one of the principal hotbeds of student radicalism alongside Nanterre, the Sorbonne, Berkeley and the Goethe-University in Frankfurt. Even today Berlin is known as a global capital for the creative industries, facilitated by the perennial bankruptcy of the city ("poor but sexy", in the words of its mayor Klaus Wowereit), which make it affordable for shoe-string creative ventures despite hampering their local market feasibility.

All of these "heterotopic" aspects of Berlin are overlaid by our particular disciplinary location. We write as scholars within a German tradition of Shakespeare studies which reaches back to the Romantic period,<sup>4</sup> a tradition which, more recently, has included such luminaries as Wolfgang Clemens and Robert Weimann. It has always been influential, yet curiously marginal to the mainstream of English-speaking Shakespeare studies. We are a team of German and expatriate Australian researchers, variously positioned by an awareness of our expatriate status and peripheral affiliation to those university traditions which formed us, or by our integration within a national

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3 See Michel Foucault, 'Different Spaces', in *Michel Foucault: The Essential Works 2: Aesthetics* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1998), 175-77; French original: 'Des espaces autres', *Dits et écrits 1954-1988*, ed. Daniel Defert & François Ewald (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), IV, 752-62.

4 See for instance Jonathan Bate (ed.), *The Romantics on Shakespeare* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997).