

REFLECTIONS

Human passions in Kurosawa's Shakespeare



DESIGN: AMREETA LETHE

Kurosawa's take on the Scottish play interestingly eschews the need for the character of Macduff—a puzzling decision in my view. I feel, undoubtedly like many others, that Macbeth without Macduff is meaningless and Kurosawa's choice to forego his part is curiously provocative in a way, divorcing Macbeth from one of the prophecies that brings his end.

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

Shakespeare's enduring international appeal is in part due to the remarkable personalities he had invented. The bulbous, comic Falstaff, the cruel Edmund and crueler Iago, the acceleratingly ambitious Macbeth and, of course, the charismatic Prince of Denmark himself—they stay relevant, unchanged in spirit through their journeys of translation, at least in the films and plays in South Asia that I am aware of. In Akira Kurosawa's three films based on Shakespeare plays, the Japanese maestro tones down this very remarkable aspect of Shakespeare. He plays around instead with the unforgettable emotions that the Bard's plays gift us.

If we look at the precise moment in Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957) when the generals Washizu and Miki (personifying Macbeth and Banquo, respectively) meet an evil spirit who reveals what the future holds for them and return to their Lord's castle to learn that the spirit's words are coming true, we see a sense of shock in the characters' faces as they move toward the camera. It is not merely shock but shock coupled with pleasure. A revelatory sequence transformed into a feeling of terror for the audience as the characters slowly approach them. This is not present in the play, where Macbeth learns the first prophecy had come true from a nobleman having arrived to congratulate him of their victory against Norway and Ireland. It is a small invention, but one that

shows a sense of dread and intrigue in the film. The audience gets a second stab of this terror through Washizu's wife, the Lady Asaji Washizu. She may not have the dominating presence of Lady Macbeth, but her trembling fingers as she tries to wash the "blood" off her fingers is as strikingly affecting as it is in the play itself.

Kurosawa's take on the Scottish play interestingly eschews the need for the character of Macduff—a puzzling decision in my view. I feel, undoubtedly like many others, that Macbeth without Macduff is meaningless and Kurosawa's choice to forego his part is curiously provocative in a way, divorcing Macbeth from one of the prophecies that brings his end.

But as one sees in Kurosawa's next venture with Shakespeare, *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960), he is not interested in either the plot or the character but in dismantling the emotions of these timeless tales and refashioning them on the screen. A noir take on Hamlet, *The Bad Sleep Well* least resembles the play and is rather a marriage of varied passions: the son intending to avenge his father, the hotheaded brother's desire to protect his sister, the paranoia regarding sanity, the acting within acting, the ghosts which materialise to offer grievances. In many ways, Kurosawa's film is exactly how an adaptation of *Hamlet* should be: vast, multi-faceted, going beyond the worldly headaches to focus on what it means to be human. Just as in *Hamlet*, one barely ever worries over Fortinbras' invasion, in *The*

Bad Sleep Well, the worrying over bribes and corrupt kickback schemes of the company in question are only background wind. It is the trammled lives of the characters, the outpouring of their charges that shakes the audience to their core.

More than two decades later, in 1985, Kurosawa's third Shakespeare film *Ran* was released. Based on *King Lear*, it is one of his supreme achievements. So magnificent is its violence, so intricately embroidered is the envy, shame, and evil of the characters that the film becomes something much larger than a war epic. Many of Shakespeare's international translations are vessels. The punk mafioso *Romeo+Juliet* (1996) is still *Romeo and Juliet* when you throw out the suits and guns. A tepid version of *Hamlet* can easily be squeezed out of *The Lion King* (1994). I would even admit *Throne of Blood*, regardless of its beauty, is a vessel from which you can easily chop out the "real" *Macbeth*. That is not possible with *Ran*. So original it is and yet so intertwined with *King Lear*, one cannot even begin to explain how Kurosawa managed to bring this into existence.

I confess to never being impressed with Edmund, the principal antagonist in *King Lear*. He is no Iago. But in *Ran*, Kurosawa rebirths him as Lady Kaede, the wife of the eldest of the three sons. In Lady Kaede, Edmund is finally fitted with a personality that is justifiable. Indeed, Lady Kaede's cruelty is a cinematic marvel. Kurosawa's *King Lear* is patently a man's world. The three daughters of *King Lear* are turned into the three sons of the ageing samurai, Hidetora. But it is Lady Kaede who shines bright amidst (or perhaps, because of) the carnage and slaughter all over the Kingdoms.

Akira Kurosawa's adaptations of Shakespeare's three great tragedies will outlive us all, especially *Ran*. The films celebrate what truly makes Shakespeare great: the passions of humanity. The speeding, destructive ambition of Hamlet as Washizu, the bottled up rage of Koichi Nishi as Hamlet, Lady Kaede's chaotic orchestrations of violence and seductions as Edmund. I often wonder what a Kurosawa adaptation of the bard's fourth great tragedy, *Othello*, would have been. How would he have, for instance, constructed Iago for the screen? One could only rest easy knowing that whatever he'd do, Kurosawa could never serve us Shakespeare at room temperature.

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DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

POETRY

Narcolepsy days

MOSTAQE AHMED

For poet Abul Hasan

Neither the pen nor the camera has changed
The pen contains the memories
The camera portrays the difference
You can't take photos of all the memories
So, the photos don't tell you everything
Playing with the light will leave you
With silent magical hours
The eyes change
So do the lips
I don't know where you belong
In the pen or in the camera
In these narcolepsy days

Translated from Bangla by Quamrul Hassan

Mostaque Ahmed, who is a physician but now works for *Save the Children*, recently earned fame for his docu-fiction, *Jhinuk Nirobe Soho*, based on the life of poet Abul Hasan.

Quamrul Hassan is an author, poet and an MFA Candidate of Creative Writing and Translation at the University of Arkansas.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted."

Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*

FICTION

VAMP

Grey was barely visible, his entire form a flurry of white garment and erratic gestures. I waited anxiously to hear of the aftermath, pacing and purring away within the plexiglass, scratching at the synthetic material even. No word for days as I purred and yowled away in a dimly-lit chamber otherwise devoid of sound, where Blue and Grey's workstation lay deserted in their absence.

RASHA JAMEEL

Anyone could see that they were a couple very much in love. Always laughing at each other's jokes. Finishing each other's sentences. Name the cliché and you'll find them living up to it without question.

Like most couples unhealthily obsessed with each other—'in love' as you might like to call it—they also shared the same job, which primarily entailed observing me from behind a plexiglass wall as I went about my day. At work, they were 'babe' and 'honey' to each other, and 'Blue' and 'Grey' to me, named after the liquid concoctions each of them constantly carried around in mini borosilicate tubes arranged in compact metallic racks. Their daily routine was rather simplistic and rarely varied—from the morning coffee to the late-night data sheets, our resident lovebirds lived the same day on repeat and in sync, seemingly as unaffected by rain or flood as by my occasional yowls.

Blue didn't quite seem like her usual self. There were muffled sobs at first, followed by some muted wailing as she curled up on the floor in a fetal position. When she finally

resumed working, she did so guided by some sense of heavy disorientation. I watched from the safety of my plexiglass enclosure as Blue snacked on her data sheets and poured the contents of her coffee tumbler into her delicate metal needles. I observed her

face gradually changing from pale to just a touch sanguine, before hearing her emit a blood curdling scream as her limbs began to contort.

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to hear of the aftermath, pacing and purring away within the plexiglass, scratching at the synthetic material even. No word for days as I purred and yowled away in a dimly-lit chamber otherwise devoid of sound, where Blue and Grey's workstation lay deserted

in their absence. Their metal needles grew exceedingly cold, deprived of contact, while a thin film of dust began to collect on the abandoned data sheets. I waited.

The official word was that it wasn't the worms. Grey referred to Blue's episode as that of a "woman under the influence of blood".

My entire being had never known such immense relief. Of course it really was the worms. All it took was a quick scratch on her forearm, as painful as a mosquito bite and just as easily dismissible, as

Blue pinched my fur with the weekly dose of blue concoction of the worms that caused my insides to disintegrate while I writhed in agony. Grey followed up the worms with a steady stream of hissing bile pumped into my veins, spreading from the back of my eyes to beans in my toes as the colour drained from them.

Grey had missed his dose in all the excitement. But it won't be long now. I let out a drawn out meow to let him know I'm waiting.

Rasha Jameel is a writer. You can now pre-order the author's NYT bestseller *How To Komolika: A Short Course To Becoming A Conventional Vamp* from Joe Goldberg's new bookstore in NYC.



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA