

Irena R. Makaryk

## “Brief Candle”?: Shakespeare in Afghanistan<sup>1</sup>

In 2002, Afghanistan began to experience a theatrical renaissance. In the capital, Kabul, The National Theatre Company was revived after nearly two decades of silence. The theatres in the provinces were also resurrected – in Mazar, Herat, Kunduz, and Faryab, among others. New independent companies also sprung up, such as the Ustaad Mohammad Farouq, Takamul, and Asmaee Theatres. Their websites emphasized the liberalization of Afghan society and their own commitment to embracing and representing various ethnicities (an allusion to their opposition to sectarian violence), while also describing practical issues such as the difficulty of finding rehearsal and performance spaces,<sup>2</sup> as well as the familiar, perennial problem of Western companies: locating sources of funding. Following the first democratic presidential election in 2004, in which Afghan women also participated, the mood in the country was optimistic. An Afghan theatre festival was launched with nearly two dozen newly-formed companies; a day was devoted to “women’s theatre”. Theatre artists from France and Germany arrived to offer workshops to actors and students during what seemed to be a period of post-war “reconstruction” (rather than, as it turned out, war).

It is not these events, however, which received worldwide attention; rather, it was a production of Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, directed by Corinne Jaber,<sup>3</sup> which premiered in Kabul in 2005 as part the city’s summer-long theatre festival (The Kabul Theatre Summer 2005 and Second Afghan National Theatre Forum).<sup>4</sup> The world press took instant, though surprised,

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<sup>1</sup> A very early version of this paper, “Afghanistan Brings Back the Bard: *Love’s Labour’s Lost* in Kabul”, was presented in August, 2006, at the International Shakespeare Congress in Stratford, England. The situation in Afghanistan has, of course, radically changed since then.

<sup>2</sup> The Takamul Theatre, for example, was rehearsing at Aschiana, a school for street kids in Kabul. The theatre profiles of these companies were accessed on 19 May 2006: <<http://www.culturalprofiles.org.uk/Afghanistan/Units/149.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> A trilingual (French, German, English) actress, Corinne Jaber has appeared on stage, screen, and television in productions as various as *The Mahabharata* (directed by Peter Brook, 1987), *Henry VIII* (directed by Greg Thompson for the Royal Shakespeare Company, 2006), the films *Immortel (ad vitam)* (directed by Enki Bilal, 2004), and *Hier encore* (directed by Rima Sammam, 2006). She won the Molière prize in 2001 (Best Actress) for her performance in *Une Bête sur la lune* (directed by Irena Brook). In addition to directing *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, she directed and helped create *Soeurs* with Fabrice Melquiot, based on the experiences, aspirations, and dreamed shared by Afghan women.

<sup>4</sup> My sincere thanks to the director, Corinne Jaber, for a long telephone conversation sharing details about the production and the process leading up to it; to American aid worker Stephen Landrigan for responding to my many e-mail queries about this remarkable production; and to

notice. “Afghanistan brings back the Bard”, “Shakespeare plays [sic] in Kabul encourage peace and love”, “Shakespeare in Kabul”, “A theatre troupe finds Shakespeare surprisingly relevant to modern-day Afghanistan,” “Kabul laughs as Shakespeare's labors are not lost,” “Shakespeare in Kabul: ‘Why all delights are vain’”, “Bard Back in Kabul in True Labor of Love,” “Love's 'Labor' not a lost cause in Kabul: A theatre troupe finds Shakespeare surprisingly relevant to modern-day Afghanistan”, “Staging a revolution: Bard's ‘Lost’ performed by men and women”, “With Shakespeare, Kabul seeks a better tomorrow”<sup>5</sup> – these are some of the newspaper headlines which flashed around the world in September 2005, registering considerable astonishment at a production of the play in the Afghan capital. As *The Oregonian* reported, “British and American forces have discovered a powerful new weapon – theatre. The most recent play of choice in the fight for hearts and minds was a Dari-language version of Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*.” “Strangely”, noted the reportage, this stratagem seemed to have succeeded (“Arts Watch. Cultural News of Note”).

This was the first Shakespeare play to be staged since the Soviet invasion of 1978 which had ushered in decades of devastation and turmoil, eventually leading to the Taliban regime (once supported by the West in the Afghan struggle against the Soviets) that suppressed and destroyed many aspects of art and culture, including the performing arts. The Taliban prohibition against displaying art that depicts living things resulted in a various acts of destruction. Most of the film archive at the Afghan Film Studios was burned down, although the staff was able to hide and thus prevent the destruction of some films. The most notorious act, however, and one carried out despite worldwide protests, was the destruction in 2001 of two 100-foot tall ancient Buddhas in Bamiyan province. The sixth-century statues, carved into a cliff, were dynamited on the orders of Mullah Mohammed Omar after the Taliban government decreed them “idols”.

In reporting on the Kabul production of *Love's Labour's Lost*, many of the newspaper headlines stressed the novelty of Shakespeare, his apparent relevance and his role as a “cultural liberator”, although, as we know, this was not a new (nor unproblematic) function for the Bard.<sup>6</sup> Over the past two

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Qais Akbar Omar for generously and copiously responding to my queries about all aspects of the production, especially concerning the translation and audience response. Also, sincere thanks to Christopher Morris, artistic director of Human Cargo (Toronto, Canada), for talking to me about his experiences in Afghanistan.

<sup>5</sup> Some of the media reports include Coghlan; “Shakespeare play staged in Kabul”; Munita; Cooney; “Shakespeare arrives in Kabul”; Baldauf; Landrigan, “Treading the boards”; Morarjee; “Arts Watch. Cultural News of Note”; “Theatre-Loving Afghans Get Shakespeare”; “Shakespeare in Kabul: Why, all delights are vain”; Barker; Pearson, and Allen. One of the reviews, “Love's 'Labor' not a lost cause in Kabul”, also appeared on the Afghanistan country website: Afghansite.com. Accessed 19 May 2006 <<http://www.afghansite.com/viewtopic.asp?id=334>>.

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that this was not the only Shakespeare play produced at this time but it was the most radical from the point of view of gender relations and the only production which received worldwide attention. An Afghanistan Election blog mentions that a production of *Romeo and*

centuries, beginning with the German Romantics, Shakespeare has frequently assumed the role of an “exemplar of literary liberty” and “titular champion of anyone who wanted to overthrow an exhausted critical system” (Taylor, 1990: 123). Just a few examples must suffice: Goethe looked to Shakespeare’s mixed forms (his “mingle-mangle” of comedy and tragedy) as models for escaping the constrictions of French neo-classical rules and opening up the full spectrum of human emotions and psychological states. In the last century, in the Soviet Union and in communist Eastern Europe, Shakespeare productions often served a subversive, allegorical function, obliquely critiquing the state and its powers, and serving as a moral and political force. As Boika Sokolova has poignantly observed about the situation in Eastern Europe,

For those in the theatre, the words of Shakespeare were a constant reminder of the lasting deeds of human spirit and a source of hope. In this context, the resilience of Shakespeare’s drama against the pressures of monolithic ideology was produced through the intellectual coauthoring and partnership with the directors of the postwar generations. For millions of people Shakespeare’s plays were as important as the discovery of penicillin.... And more than that, they were a medium for communicating truths unspeakable and horrors unfathomable, a way of exorcizing the pent-up tensions of the system where they were kept prisoners, ultimately a tool of its subversion and demise. (98)<sup>7</sup>

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*Juliet* (in Dari) was also on the boards. Unlike the six-week preparations which the actors underwent for *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, this show had little prep time. As a consequence, only the first hour was actually performed (up to the point of the exchange of vows between the young lovers); the rest of the play was recounted by a narrator. The narrative mode is, of course, closer and more congenial to the traditional Afghan form of storytelling. It should also be noted that, except for *Juliet*, this was an all-male production, a fact which, according to Sam Zarifi, gave the show “a note of historical Shakespearean authenticity”-- although this permitted the production to bypass gender issues. The theme of the production was “the folly of needless violence” and its threat to youth, a topic which deeply resonated with the audience who were evidently moved by it. Sam Zarifi, “Afghanistan Election Blog”, 15 September 2005, Kabul, 19 May 2006 <<http://www.afgha.com>>.

<sup>7</sup> The literature on political and foreign Shakespeare is extensive. Only a few titles are suggested here. Dennis Kennedy’s book first launched a serious interest in “foreign Shakespeare”. See Kennedy, ed., *Foreign Shakespeare* (Cambridge UP, 1993); Jonathan Dollimore and Peter Stallybrass, eds., *Political Shakespeare; Essays in Cultural Materialism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994); John Joughin, ed., *Shakespeare and National Culture* (Manchester UP, 1997). With the fall of the USSR, European (Eastern and Western) came under scrutiny: Michael Hattaway, Boika Sokolova, and Derek Roper, eds., *Shakespeare in the New Europe* (Sheffield Academic P, 1994); Irena R. Makaryk, *Shakespeare in the Undiscovered Bourn* (U of Toronto P, 2004); and Makaryk and Joseph G. Price, *Shakespeare in the Worlds of Communisms and Socialism* (U of Toronto, 2006). Ania Loomba has carried out considerable work on postcolonial Shakespeare, including Loomba and Martin Orkin, eds., *Postcolonial Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 1998). More

Postcolonial, cultural materialist, and feminist critique have all provided ample evidence of Shakespeare's use-function in a wide variety of political capacities, including his less savoury roles, such as the implication of his works in imperialist projects, empire building, and the slave trade. Postcolonial studies in particular have stressed the way in which art may be simultaneously liberating and enchainning. Shakespeare in India, for example, has been studied as an imposition of British cultural values upon local poetic and dramatic traditions at the same time as essential to those wishing to become a small part of the ruling class.

As a political tool, *Love's Labour's Lost* was an odd choice, made even stranger by being the first Shakespearean production in decades. It is not a play that immediately springs to mind as an attractively malleable play for any immediate propagandistic purposes. A comedy rather than history or tragedy, it does not, for example, have a direct portrayal of corrupt authority as in *Richard III* or *Macbeth*; nor the rousing speeches of a *Henry V* or the venerable tradition of the anguished questioning of *Hamlet* – all plays which have, in various periods, been employed as comments on the immediate or recent political situation. By comparison, *Love's Labour's Lost* is more precious and more firmly rooted in a distant time and place. Indeed, Anne Barton refers to *Love's Labour's Lost* as “the most relentlessly Elizabethan of all Shakespeare's plays”, full of “elaborate conceits, parodies of spoken and written styles and obscure topical allusions” (208).

The surprising decision to stage Shakespeare in Kabul in 2005 raises some interesting questions. Who was staging Shakespeare for whom and why? How was Shakespeare being used? Was he simply a cultural site onto which wartime aggression and ideological conflict were displaced? Was he a cultural mediator in the context of post-war reconstruction and the re-establishment of civil society? A unifying cultural figure? Was this production yet another example of Western imperialism and the imposition of Western aesthetic values? Another example of the consumer society (here, selling the global “brand” of Shakespeare)? These complex and difficult issues may only be glanced at in this essay which focuses on reconstructing the production of *Love's Labour's Lost* and discussing some of the major themes raised by the media coverage. The essay will also suggest that the production may not fit comfortably into pre-established patterns of political interpretations of “foreign” Shakespeare<sup>8</sup> and

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recently, Asian and South-East Asian has received important attention. See, for example, Yong Li Lan, “Shakespeare and the Fiction of the Intercultural”, *Shakespeare and Performance*, eds. Barbara Hodgson and W.B. Worthen (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) 527-549; Alex Huang, *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange* (New York: Columbia UP, 2009). A general survey of the terrain of the past two decades may be found in Anthony B. Dawson, “International Shakespeare”, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage*, eds. Stanley Wells and Sarah Stanton (Cambridge UP, 2002) 174-193.

<sup>8</sup> The term is Dennis Kennedy's and the title of his previously cited eponymous book.

that, further, the strength of local cultural traditions play a decisive part in the ultimate impact (or not) of Shakespeare in Afghanistan.

### Love’s Labour: The Playtext

The play was directed by Corinne Jaber. She was born in Germany to German-Syrian parents, raised in Germany and Canada, and lived in Paris from her teens where she ultimately became an actress. *Love’s Labour’s Lost* was her directorial debut. Jaber had some experience of multicultural societies and an awareness of persecuted minorities. Despite her mixed heritage, as a Westerner Jaber was not immune to the charge of some critics who could wonder whether her project was just another, although perhaps benign and updated, version of “France’s self-indulgent *mission civilisatrice*”.<sup>9</sup> Although Jaber did not stage Molière or any other French playwright, she did decide to stage Shakespeare, the premiere playwright of the Western world.

Arriving in Kabul to run workshops for local actors in the spring of 2005, Jaber delightedly watched them improvise a great deal with Shakespeare and was invited by the Afghans to direct them in a play. Discussing what works they might wish to stage, Jaber was told that, after decades of war, the actors did not want to do any tragedies, although they were “aching to take on meatier roles” (qtd. in Barker, “Bard back in Kabul”). Their improvisatory success led to the choice of taking on one of Shakespeare’s plays (Jaber, E-mail, 4 Aug 2010). She chose *Love’s Labour’s Lost* both because it had an equal number of roles for men and women (fact which would lead to one of the primary themes of the media’s reports: the emphasis on gender relations – a theme discussed below), and because Shakespeare’s play was an “Afghan story”:

The play is about courtship, about four noblemen going on a retreat. It’s totally Afghan. The men and women never touch each other. Totally Afghan again. They are totally polite. They play games. They always visit the women through intermediaries. They send women messages. The couples fall in love, but because of the death of the [Princess’s] father, they cannot marry. This is totally Afghan. (Jaber, Telephone Conversation, 1 Aug 2010)

Above all, she was inspired by the “hymn to women” (Jaber, E-mail, 4 Aug 2010) of Berowne’s lines: “From women’s eyes this doctrine I derive: / They are the ground, the books, the academes, / From whence doth spring the true

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<sup>9</sup> The question was posed by Ishaan Tharoor of Ariane Mnouchkine’s work in Kabul. See “The Most Revolutionary Art Form”, *The Nation* 4 August 2005, 8 July 2010 <<http://www.thenation.com>>.

Promethean fire” (*LLL*, 4.3.298-300). Jaber’s choice of play text was made easier by the fact that Shakespeare’s complete works were readily available, having already been translated into Farsi, a language not too far removed from Dari (one of the two main Afghan languages), by a much admired Oxford-educated Iranian scholar, Alaeddin Pazargadi. According to American educational aid worker Stephen Landrigan, the Persian translation mimicked iambic pentameter “to a large extent” (Landrigan, E-mail, 23 May 2006).<sup>10</sup>

The final script of the play was the result of a multicultural, collective effort which included Jaber (German-Syrian-Canadian-French), Qaseem Elmi, and Qais Akbar Omar (Afghans) who prepared the Dari version from the Farsi text; some assistance with the text also came from Landrigan (American). Omar already was familiar with Shakespeare. After having read an excerpt from *Hamlet* while in university, he attempted to read more of Shakespeare’s works in English because he found “his work very unusual with a different quality”. Finding the complete English works too difficult to understand, he had turned to the Dari translation of *Othello*: “unlike other things I have ever read, very lustrous yet archaic.... It was not a happy story, but it was a work of intelligence and imagination, yet so close to being real, and entertaining” (E-mail, 13 July 2010).<sup>11</sup> Omar also acted as an interpreter during the production (both of the English language and of foreign culture) and thus as the main contact between Jaber and the actors; he also assisted in contributing to some aspects of the production. He thus fulfilled a crucial role in the creation and reception of this production. But the project, from inception to finish, was spearheaded by Jaber. The experience was “extreme directing” in a conflict zone; not an easy task for a woman working without any support systems and with an all-Afghan cast (Jaber, Telephone conversation, 1 Aug 2010).<sup>12</sup>

Together, the team, along with the actors, re-worked *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, setting the play in Afghanistan, thus “domesticating” Shakespeare (Venuti 9)<sup>13</sup> and, in the process, following a long tradition of translation and adaptation that has done the same.<sup>14</sup> Like all translations, this one was the result of a

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<sup>10</sup> Landrigan is a former journalist with the Washington Post and BBC Radio, and was the Communications Coordinator for the Afghanistan Primary Education Program. See <<http://www.auaf.edu.af/about/consultants.html>>, accessed on 25 May 2006. His claim may be tested by listening to clips of the actors reciting parts of the Shakespeare text found at <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/programmes/worldtoday/news/story/2005/09/050908\\_wtselect\\_08\\_09.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/programmes/worldtoday/news/story/2005/09/050908_wtselect_08_09.shtml)>, accessed on 19 May 2006.

<sup>11</sup> All the male actors were professionals except for the youngest, who was a theatre student. The young women were, with two exceptions, also professional actors (Jaber, Telephone conversation, 1 Aug 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Jaber pointed out that, unlike other theatre artists (as, for example, Arian Mnouchkine), she did not arrive in Kabul with a large company or with any visible means of support.

<sup>13</sup> Lawrence Venuti argues that translation is “inevitable domestication” (9).

<sup>14</sup> Scholarly appreciation and theorization of adaptation has shifted considerably over the past three decades with the interrogation of issues of originality, authorship, and text. See, for example, a useful summary in “General Introduction”, *Adaptations of Shakespeare from the 17th Century to*

“negotiation”<sup>15</sup> between its foreign source and its target local culture, resulting in exclusions as well as creative inclusions.<sup>16</sup> The choice of language, Dari, while spoken by the great majority of Afghans, already excluded those who spoke Pashto, the other main Afghan language, as well as those who spoke Uzbek and Tajik (Landrigan, E-mail, 23 May 2006).<sup>17</sup>

Briefly, as we recall, the story concerns the ambition of Ferdinand, King of Navarre, and his companions Berowne, Longaville, and Dumaine, to transform the court into an “academe” where they will win fame and overcome death by studying, fasting, and avoiding – upon peril of extreme punishment – the company of women. Their sole source of entertainment is to come from their mockery of a foppish Spanish courtier, Don Armado. But, the ambitious project begins to unravel almost immediately when Costard (the “natural” fool) is found “consorting” with a wench, Jacquenetta. As he sagely explains, “Such is the simplicity of man to hearken after the flesh” (1:1:217). Hard on the heels of this discovery comes the news of the arrival of the Princess of France, accompanied by her three ladies (Rosaline, Maria, Katherine), seeking the surrender of Aquitaine to the sick, bedridden King of France whom the Princess is representing. Since this is comedy, the four men fall immediately in love with the four women but, to avoid technically forswearing themselves, they house the ladies in the park rather than at court. There, they begin to woo them in a series of failed, comical attempts, including a Masque in which the men come to visit the ladies disguised as Russians or Muscovites. The wiser women remain impervious to the men’s inept tactics. The plays-within-plays and the witty repartee, especially of the dark-haired Rosaline who speaks with what one of the characters calls a “greasy tongue”, contribute to the effect of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* as a dramatic soufflé; an impression which suddenly dissipates only at the

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*the Present*, eds. Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier (New York: Routledge, 2000), and a broader consideration of the issues in Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> The term is taken from translation theory. See, for example, Susan Bassnett, “Still Trapped in the Labyrinth: Further Reflections on Translation and Theatre”, *Constructing Cultures; Essays on Literary Translation*, Topics in Translation 11, eds. Bassnett and André Lefevere (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1998) 93, who discusses the “sliding scale of acculturation” in translating the text: it can remain “exotic” (foreign), be modified or accommodated, or, on the far end of the scale, completely “domesticated”. Bassnett reminds us that translation “always happens in a continuum, and the context in which the translation takes place necessarily affects how the translation is made” (93). As has been suggested, the context, in this case in Afghanistan is complex and involves a number of people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Afghanistan itself is not a homogeneous country and the responses to the adaptation and performance varied (as will be seen). The “complete” list of possible translation strategies is still probably that of T.H. Savory, *The Art of Translation* (London: Cape, 1968) 54.

<sup>16</sup> The actual process of creating the text seems to have been even more complex, as Landrigan suggested in an e-mail to the author, 23 May 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Landrigan explained that very few of the actors spoke Pashto well enough to act in that language. Some Pashto-speaking friends did not come to the performance because of the choice of language, even though they speak Dari. Others may have stayed away from the same reason.

very end of the play with the remarkable entry of Marcade, a black-clad messenger bearing news of the King of France's death and thus bringing all frivolity to an abrupt conclusion. As the women prepare to return home, the men request that redemptive trials and penances be imposed upon them. Giving up their original death-wish (that is, the refusal of love and life) but now paradoxically truly accepting the reality of death, the men live in the hope that, in twelve months' time, they will finally win love and be freed from their self-imposed bondage.

The Princess of France was turned into Shardokht-e-Herat (played by Sabah Sahar) -- a princess from Herat, a city set in the rolling hills of western Afghanistan and connected with ancient forms of comic drama. The King of Navarre, Berowne, Dumaine, and Longaville became Haroon, a fictitious king of Kabul (Shah Mohammed Noori), and his three friends, Sohrab (Mohammed Arif Bahonar), Mansour (Wali Faizal Azizi), and Sherzad (Nabi Tanha). The fame-inspired young men who swore to keep to "strict observances"--"to study, fast, and not to sleep", as well as not to speak or see women -- only obliquely and mockingly alluded to the feared and disciplined Taliban who had prohibited cultural events and strictly regulated gender relations. Jaber had toyed with the idea of a more obvious satire of the Taliban. After an improvisation session in which the potential comedy was exaggeratedly explored "for fun" (Jaber, Telephone conversation, 1 August 2010),<sup>18</sup> she discarded it because she wished to avoid a political interpretation of the play: "If people wanted to make political connections, they could; but we didn't want to" (Jaber, Telephone conversation, 1 August 2010). Direct ridicule of the noblemen would also have destroyed the positive aspects of the male protagonists and the lyrical nature of the plot.

Shakespeare's play was transformed into an hour and half romantic comedy of seven scenes and ten roles (five women, five men). Long monologues were shortened and the play was generally simplified. What remained of the plot seemed "very Afghan", according to both Jaber and Omar. Although a number of elements of Shakespeare's play were problematic, others harmonized with Afghan culture. Respecting the Afghan culture of modesty meant removing the double entendres and all scatological references. Excluded from the adaptation were all the comic and bawdy roles -- Costard, Armado, Moth, Dull, Holofernes, Nathaniel, and Jacquenetta -- with the resultant loss of most of the punning and rhetorical gymnastics. Rosaline became just another of the lovely ladies accompanying the Princess, Shardokht-e-Herat, rather than a pert, witty woman of possibly dubious morals. But the adapters also provocatively chose to maintain a true Shakespearean touch: his comic heroine. The Princess's strength of intelligence, her wit, and agency were not compromised; she, not the King of Navarre, remained the central figure of the play.

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<sup>18</sup> The actors portrayed the Taliban as a vulgar and illiterate lot: they smoked dope, spit, coughed, picked lice off each other, and so on; and were nothing like the feared Taliban. The situation seems to confirm the adage that we mock what we most fear.



Since poetry (especially epic poetry) is regarded as the highest form of art in Afghan culture and a major source of entertainment, the “contest” of the courtiers’ readings of their sonnets was much appreciated. The combination of would-be scholars and budding poets also reflected Afghan reality because most Afghan scholars are, in fact, poets. Also highly valued are Afghan folk and topical songs; these, too, were introduced into the play, as will be seen.

There were also some transformations. Fatima (Parween Mooschatael), a lady-in-waiting, replaced the earthy Costard, taking upon herself some of the mildest of his comic exchanges, as for example:

*Sohrab [Berowne]:*  
My good lady, I must employ thee:  
Do one thing for me that I shall entreat.

*Fatima:*  
When would you have it done, sir?

*Sohrab:*  
This afternoon.

*Fatima:*  
Well, I will do it, sir: fare you well.

*Sohrab:*  
Thou knowest not what it is.

*Fatima:*  
I shall know, sir, when I have done it. (*LLL*, scene 3)

Afghan place names such as Kandahar and Herat replaced the French names of Shakespeare’s play. Other changes were made as well. After making fools of the men who were twice forsworn, the Princess urged them to “put it right with music” (*LLL*, scene 6), a signal for the courtiers to bring out musical instruments and sing an Afghan folk song. After being serenaded for a verse, the ladies joined in the singing – a notably moving moment in the play since the Taliban prohibition against women singing in public had been in force until recently.

One of the two major cultural obstacles to staging the play proved to be what is usually thought of as the innocuous Masque of the Muscovites. The lingering hatred of the Russians whose invasion cost 1.3 million Afghan lives (Coghlan, “Afghanistan brings back the Bard”) was so strong that the actors simply refused to perform that section of the play. The actors and the director reached an impasse. They brainstormed about different possibilities, finally resting upon the idea of transforming the Muscovites into East Indians. Each of the actors came up with a supplementary suggestion: one proposed an Indian song, another Bollywood dancing, a third, the costuming, and so on (Omar,

personal e-mail, 13 July 2010). They then improvised a scene that transformed the Muscovites into Indians who spoke in Urdu and performed Bollywood-style song-and-dance routines. Omar commented that, on the next day, upon seeing them rehearse the new scene, “Corinne could not hold back laughing. She laughed so hard that she became red and blue, even though she had no idea what the actors were saying. Since we laughed so hard, the employees of FCCS [The Foundation] came to see what was going on (...). The audience laughed so hard, they wanted them to play the scene again” (Omar, personal e-mail, 13 July 2010). This was destined to be the best received and funniest moments of the production.

The general shape of Shakespeare’s scene was followed but topical references were added by each of the actors, thus making Shakespeare “their contemporary” (to use Jan Kott’s term). Like many other adaptations of Shakespeare over the past centuries, this version thus relied on “domestication” – adaptation as well as translation – to bring the foreign text closer in understanding to its “target” audience. It proved much easier for the Afghan Muslims to mock Indian cultural forms than it was to attempt to laugh at recent, still detested occupants. As one reporter observed, “Key to the play’s appeal to a local audience was the use of slapstick choreography and songs lifted from Indian movies which are avidly watched by Afghan audiences” (Morarjee, “Kabul laughs”).

As in many Indian films, the adapted and translated script turned Shakespeare’s play essentially into a tale focused on misguided goals, misunderstandings in love, and inept courtship. The comic singing and dancing – entirely “outside” of Shakespeare’s text – made a real connection with the audience. The courtiers’ ridiculous performance may have also recalled the Afghan theatre’s affiliation with the trivial-farcical wedding performers and thus worked in a complex way simultaneously mocking both others’ and their own traditions; but it may have had a darker side, too. Under the Taliban, adherents of the Hindu religion – like Jews under the Nazis – were forced to identify themselves by wearing a gold badge (Albone A5).

Despite the laughter, physically and mentally, the war was never far away. As one reporter observed, a striking incident occurred during a rehearsal:

when the male actors were asked to roll up their pant legs and dress up in Indian-style dhoti loincloths. It was then that [reporter] Scott [Baldouf] saw the deeply scarred leg of actor Wali Faisal Azizi.

‘This happened in a rocket attack by Hekmatyar’, said Azizi, naming the Afghan commander who launched a barrage of rockets that killed five of his friends standing around him.

Azizi was the lone survivor of his friends. ‘I asked Azizi where the attack had taken place, and he pointed to a

spot just 300 yards outside the gate from where the play will be performed’. (Baldauf, “Love’s ‘Labour’ not a lost cause”)

With such tangible reminders of war, it is not surprising that Afghans preferred to stage comedies rather than sombre tragedies – although Shakespeare’s “mingle-mangle” (the trivialities of love games followed by the sudden intrusion of death) struck many as being true to their everyday reality.

### “What’s Past Is Prologue”?

*Love’s Labour’s Lost* was staged on the grounds of The Foundation for Culture and Civil Society for four evenings (August 31, September 1, 3, 4) and, on its last night (September 5), in the more evocative ruins of Kabul’s sixteenth-century Bagh-e-Babur, a park fiercely fought over during the civil war, and the place where Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur, the founder of the Mughal empire, lies buried. It is, then, a place associated both with the grandeur of the past and the sorrows of recent – and continuing – violent events. The park, now part of the grounds for The Foundation for Culture and Civil Society, was, for many Western reporters, a “magical” setting for a Shakespeare play.<sup>19</sup>

According to its website accessed in 2006, The Foundation was created by a group of Afghans in March 2003 “as an independent social organization”, its main objective being “to become a focal point for all activities promoting modern Afghan culture and the strengthening of civil society (...) and a bridge to the rest of the world for the artistic and intellectual communities of Afghanistan”. The Foundation promotes cultural diversity and strengthening a sense of national identity “by supporting Afghans’ efforts to build civil society by and giving expression to both old and new cultural forms” (“Afghanistan Cultural Profile”). To further these aims, The Foundation undertakes a variety of activities, all archived on the web and including weekly public events in its multi-use historic building that houses a stage, art exhibition space, cinema club, library, and conference rooms. The Shakespeare production thus seemed to conform to the stated larger aims of cultural mediation, outreach, and the introduction of new cultural forms. The Foundation provided a safe and neutral environment for rehearsal and acting space (not financial or other any assistance) without which the production could not have taken place.

Theatre is not, however, one of the entirely new cultural forms. As indigenous trivial entertainment, theatre has centuries-long connections with folkloric traditions, some of which are still extant. Ancient itinerant players performed short comic scenes and may have not just influenced the development of Western comic drama, but also been its source. This comic tradition remains

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<sup>19</sup> For example, see the report in *The Economist*, “Shakespeare in Kabul”.

alive in the slapstick entertainers who perform at Afghan weddings today, and in the para-theatrical elements of storytelling. But, unlike storytelling and poetry recitation that date back thousands of years and still dominate as the most deeply respected art forms, the performing arts occupy a “somewhat ambiguous position in the Afghan value system in which it is regarded at best as a trivial pursuit and at worst as downright sinful” (“Performing Arts”).

Western-style theatre, however, is of a much more recent vintage and has a history of strong ties to courtly reformist – that is, Western-influenced – circles.<sup>20</sup> It was first introduced as an art form in the late 1920s by King Amanullah Khan who engaged Britain in the third Afghan War and led his country to independence. He also had European classics staged, though the first production was of a patriotic play, *Mother of the Nation*, staged in a garden, at the royal retreat of Paghman (now destroyed) outside of Kabul (qtd. in Rahman, “Risky revival”).<sup>21</sup> Afghan interest in Western theatre fell with the declining fortunes of Amanullah who was deposed – perhaps as a result of his massive efforts to modernize the country. Interest in theatre was revived in the 1950s when, once again, productions were sponsored by courtly reformist circles (King Zahir Shah; overthrown in 1973 in a military coup which resulted in the creation of a republic). By the 1960s, Turkish theatre artist Farouk Afandi arrived to teach theatrical techniques while, for their part, some Afghans traveled abroad to study theatre in the USA and Germany. They returned to educate a generation in theatre arts. By the 1970s, a state-of-the-art German-designed theatre with a revolving stage and seating for 700 – today, “pocked with holes from artillery bombardment” (Munita, “Shakespeare plays”) – was built in Kabul where, among other playwrights, Shakespeare, Chekhov, and Brecht were performed in adapted versions. During the Soviet occupation, interest in the theatre continued to develop; even Kabul’s police and firemen had their own companies (Rahman, “Risky revival”). Although harshly suppressed under the Taliban, theatre was clandestinely permitted in Kabul University by a theatre-loving president, who quietly allowed performances for a very restricted audience and on restricted

<sup>20</sup> Information about Afghan theatre traditions is not readily available and has only recently become a subject of interest. Scholars are now attempting to recover ancient folkloric theatre forms, especially comic scenes. There are no books on the subject of the history of theatre in Afghanistan. *The Cambridge Guide* includes only one sentence on Afghan theatre in its seventeen-page overview of the theatre of the Middle East. See William O. Beeman, B. Kamal Abdel-Malek, and Judith Greenwood, “Middle East”, *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, ed. Martin Banham (Cambridge UP, 1995) 731. One of the few sources on Afghan theatre is the *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: Asia Pacific* (Routledge, online). See the overview, “Afghanistan”, by WECT staff with Khan Agah Soroor, trans. by Waheed Amad Soroor. Accessed on 25 May 2006. Because of the war, there is now great interest in the history and the theatre of the country. This has resulted in some interesting creative work, as for example, Tricycle Theatre’s (London) *The Great Game*, twelve half-hour commissioned plays on the topic of the history of Afghanistan.

<sup>21</sup> Productions of European classics had, in fact, existed in Kabul in the last decades of the previous century, when European colonial settlers engaged in amateur productions for their own entertainment.

themes. Plays which served Islamic interests could be permitted but none with romantic or religious topics. Thus, for example, a play on the topic of photographers harassing people and profiting from their work would appropriately show the unpalatable consequences of engagement in non-Islamic activities (Rahman, “Risky revival”).

Shakespeare’s return to Afghanistan’s public stage in September 2005 thus seemed to follow a familiar pattern: he was foreign material allied with reformist and Westernizing forces; in the past, such forces were eventually overturned and defeated, if not forgotten. As with earlier twentieth-century Afghan productions, the 2005 Kabul production of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* appeared, as has been noted, in a translated and adapted version. Landrigan explained to reporters who were surprised by the staging of a Shakespeare play in such an unlikely locale that “Shakespeare is so adaptable because he writes universal truths of human experience” (qtd. in Krimmel, “Shakespeare in Kabul”). Such claims did not sit well with all Afghans. For “Ali”, a contributor to “Worldchanging” (a “collaborative blog”), Shakespeare represented yet another example of unwelcome foreign incursions onto his native soil. Imported theatre was just like imported political struggles and values. He angrily wrote in response:

This what Afghan pplz have been waiting for years when they were fighting a proxy war of west against Russia. Imported president, imported democracy and now imported theatre. Mr. Steven Landrigan, please go out and walk in streets you can find local truths of human experience. But I am sure u can not walk out in street like the ‘elected president’. (“Ali”)

While sarcastically encouraging the discovery of “human truth” on the streets of Kabul, “Ali” warns about the dangers of walking about without an accompanying security force. In his interpretation, Shakespeare is the site of a displaced struggle for power between Russia and the West. Just as the Soviets had invaded his country, so, now, did Western forces, bringing with them an equally unpalatable imported democracy, a puppet president, and an unwanted theatre.

While “Ali’s” critical blog about this production was quite rare in 2005 (it was the only negative web comment this author was able to find in that year<sup>22</sup>), criticism of the West has been exponentially rising together with the

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<sup>22</sup> Omar, in an e-mail on 13 July 2010, wrote the following: “I personally haven’t heard anyone criticize the play, because we did not leave any blank space for anyone to criticize. All the actors were dressed with nomadic-royal traditional Afghan clothes, *Shalwar Kamiz*, and turban. The actresses were dressed with colourful nomadic dresses, baggy pants, long scarves, and nomadic jewelleryes.” Jaber was even more firm on this point: “I was very adamant on this point [not imposing Western values]. I saw Peter Brook and asked for his advice before going there. He

escalation of the war, its violence and destruction. The Taliban, assumed to have been routed six years ago, have returned and are a political force, potentially a deciding one, in the future of the country. A marker of the changing relations between Afghanistan and the West – disenchantment, growing critique and opposition – may be seen in the 2010 website of The Foundation for Culture and Civil Society. Amended since its first posting, its text now insists more firmly upon the *national* and independent character of the organization, while downplaying international, foreign connections (emphasis mine):

The national Afghan Foundation for Culture and Civil Society was established in March 2003 as an *independent, non profit and non governmental* social organization by a *group of Afghans* concerned with the fate of Afghan culture and the strengthening of Afghan civil society. Its board member include senior member of the Academy of Sciences, the Human Rights Commission, the Judiciary, members of artists' and research organization of Kabul University, and the Director of the National Museum.

The foundation is registered with the Ministry of Justice as *an independent, non profit and non governmental* social foundation. *Its staff is fully Afghan*, although it benefits from the advice given by foreigners (...). The Foundation's main objective is to become a focal point for all activities promoting modern Afghan culture and the strengthening of civil society. It is at once a motor for *national* development, within the framework of the peace process and *national* reconstruction efforts, and a *bridge to the rest of the artistic and intellectual communities of Afghanistan....*

The Foundation has established linkages with partners, international or Afghan, to initiate activities in the provinces with *local artists* and civil society groups. These range from traveling theatre campaigns [sic] to local music festival and from advocating women's rights in remote areas to holding round tables pressing social or culture issues.

The Foundation also helps Afghan artists travel abroad, and hosts events organized by *Afghan artists or researchers* living abroad. On the other hand, it has provided a platform

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advised me not to go in there with ideas of 'Western know-how', but to take what is on offer, to be aware of what people can give you. That is what I did" (Telephone conversation, 1 August 2010).

for foreign artists visiting in Afghanistan, to expose the Afghan public to foreign culture forms.

Finally, in order ensure more citizens' participation in the peace and reconstruction process, the Foundation for Culture and Civil Society is talking part in *nationwide outreach efforts to involve as many local partners and community-based organizations as possible in such processes as the Constitutional Loya Jirga, election, and good governance.* (*Foundation for Culture and Civil Society*)<sup>23</sup>

In 2005, however, it seemed that many Afghans believed that their world was changing for the better. The new acquaintance with Shakespeare through the production of *Love's Labour's Lost* suggested that the divisions between East and West were not necessarily as fixed, finite, or impenetrable as first imagined. Domesticated Shakespeare that included poetry, Afghan music, and much laughter made the Bard seem almost partly Afghan to some of the actors. Wali Faisal Azizi (Mansour/Dumain) commented, “Obviously, I can’t tell you that Shakespeare was an Afghan, but he was a great writer.” Echoing Landrigan’s phrase about “universal truths”, he explained his enthusiasm: “Shakespeare’s secret is that beside [sic] knowing about people of his country, he had insight into the human heart. That is why he is great” (qtd. in Baldauf, “Love’s ‘Labour’ not a lost cause”). Similarly, Omar remarked, “Though Rumi [a thirteenth-century poet and mystic] and Shakespeare lived in different centuries, but they share the same insight about the human’s heart and essence. That is why they are both worldwide famous and well read around the globe” (E-mail, 13 July 2010). The other members of the cast made similar public statements, even as they worried, in the weeks leading up to the premiere, whether they would have an audience; whether people would laugh; and, ultimately, whether their audience would understand Shakespeare (Barker, “Bard back in Kabul”).

### **Gender Relations: “O, And I, Forsooth, In Love! I That Have Been Love’s Whip”**

Media coverage of the Shakespeare production revolved around a number of reiterated themes, especially two connected issues: theatre as “beneficial” propaganda and gender relations. A staple for centuries in Western drama, love is still a novel theme for public exploration on the Afghan stage. Malcolm Jardine, a representative of the British Council in Kabul, described the

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<sup>23</sup> It should be noted that, since its inception, the Foundation has received substantial support from The World Bank and the Open Society Institute, among many others. This Western support undercuts The Foundation’s claims of complete independence.

adapted *Love's Labour's Lost* as “a story about the survival of romantic love in difficult circumstances, like in Muslim countries and especially Afghanistan” (qtd. in Munita, “Shakespeare plays”) – alluding to the practice of arranged marriages. Nabi Tanha (Berowne/Sherzad; a well-known Afghan film and television actor and an acting instructor at Kabul University) applauded the choice of topic: it was, he was quoted as saying, about time that the Afghan people got a good love story. “*Ishq*, or love, is a miracle from God, and everybody in the world is like this, they can't resist love” (qtd. in Baldauf, “Love's ‘Labor’ not a lost cause in Kabul”). Yet the articulation of love was not easy to achieve on the stage.

Gender relations and expressions of emotion were among the most difficult of cultural obstacles to overcome. Director Jaber recalled that it was problematic to “get these actors to reach down deep into themselves to that fragile part of each person where love resides, a part that most Afghans have kept hidden for years” (qtd. in Baldauf, “Love's ‘Labor’ not a lost cause”). In arranged marriages, love and marriage were not obvious partners. But other aspects of gender relations did have a resonance in Afghan culture. Filmmaker Sabah-e Sahar, who played the Princess, easily identified with Elizabethan ideas about love and female modesty which she found similar to those in Afghanistan:

“Love is not new in this country,” says Ms. Sahar, who has supported herself for years as a policewoman. “But you can't tell people, oh, I've fallen in love. There's lots of change from that black period until now, the Taliban period, when you couldn't even walk with your own husband in the street. In this time, we have lots of freedom. But love is still something you should keep secret.” (Baldauf, “Love's ‘Labor’ not a lost cause”)

The actors were flummoxed when Jaber “encouraged the men to draw on their experiences to express love (...) they looked at her blankly. Even a week before opening, no one seemed to know what to do” (Landrigan, “Treading the boards”). The problems of expressing what has hitherto been prohibited were compounded by the fact that a few of the actors had never appeared on a stage before, and none (according to Omar) had encountered a text as dense or poetic. The textual problem was less due to Shakespeare than to Alaeddin Pazargardi whose difficult text formed the basis of the play script. Even those actors who could read could not fully understand the meaning of the words. The actors memorized words without fully understanding what they meant; this finally necessitated a simplification of some of the language (that is, finding the current Dari words to replace more archaic Farsi forms). Omar explained that he taught the actors “the true meanings of each word and sentence. When they realized the true meanings, they were excited to say their lines” (E-mail, 13 July 2010). Before the last performance, Wali Faisal Azizi (Mansour/Dumain) whispered to



Omar, “Qais, now I really know what I’m saying. I had no idea how deep this was when I first read the script. It is like Rumi and Hafiz [Iranian mystic and poet]; it works on you later when you digest it” (qtd. in Omar, E-mail, 13 July 2010).

While the oblique mockery of the courtiers as Taliban-like could be interpreted as forming a part of the undertow of the play, gender relations were, in fact, more central to the media’s view of the production’s message; they also presented the main obstacle to performing Shakespeare. Simply having women and men onstage together was revolutionary. At first, the actors would not even look at each other (Jaber qtd. in Coghlan, “Afghanistan brings back the Bard”). The shock of seeing women onstage formed a leitmotif in the world press coverage. *USA Today*, for example, noted with surprise that “[T]he actresses do not hide behind veils or all-encompassing burqas, like most women on the streets outside. The young characters also openly flirt – taboo in a country where men and women are not supposed to speak to each other unless they are related” (Munita, “Shakespeare plays”).

“Normalized” gender relations – that is, the freedom for women to appear alongside men, the freedom to dance, sing, and hold hands publicly – was one of the potent messages of the production. Speaking about the production and his part in it, Azizi connected democracy to Western-style gender relations: “The Taliban would never allow us to put on a play, to tell a story about love. Now we have a democracy and we can show these things to our people. I am so proud” (qtd. in Coghlan, “Afghanistan brings back the Bard”). The links between theatre and democracy were thus underscored by the actors themselves. Political freedom (as, for example, exemplified by free elections) was equated with the choice to perform publicly before an audience and to speak about “immodest” topics like love. “Reformist” principles were thus welcomed by some groups, as they were in the past, in tandem with theatre.

Intimately and deeply intertwined with cultural and religious mores, the treatment of gender relations had, and continues to have, the power to move, shock, and silence. It was also one of the issues targeted by Western aid workers in their efforts to transform or reform civil society. In attempting to anticipate and to counter sophisticated Taliban propaganda strategies, Western powers employed a variety of cultural tools, among them theatre – which, claims Afghan playwright Aziz Elyas, “is the best way to communicate messages in Afghanistan, whether it be about peace, democracy or women's rights. It's much more popular than television” (qtd. in Cooney, “Theatre-Loving Afghans Get Shakespeare”). Whether this is true or not (the much greater popularity of poetry recitation, perhaps generously, is suppressed in this claim), the efforts to use theatre as “benign propaganda” also had, as an aim, to reconnect villages to each other and to urban centres. This objective was meant to reverse the Taliban’s tactics of isolation and control which, according to Major Quentin Innis (a Canadian communications strategist), are very like the methods of an abusive

spouse who maintains control through segregation, violence, and isolation (York, "Mustering strategies").<sup>24</sup>

Roving troupes of actors were used as a type of *biblia pauperum* by the U.S. Agency for International Development. Requiring only a bus and no high-tech equipment, actors have traveled where computer communications cannot: to remote rural areas to perform such "agit-prop" theatre pieces as *Good Choice*, intended to educate Afghans about the electoral democratic process in anticipation of the national elections in September 2005 (Cooney, "Theatre-Loving Afghans Get Shakespeare"). The Kabul Theatre company has also toured several provinces presenting short plays on the theme of women's education (Rahman, "Risky revival"), of which the play titled *Man Jinsse Dowom Nistam* [I Am Not a Second Gender] (listed on the Foundation's website), is likely a part. Other themes taken up by theatre included "counter-narcotics and peace" (*Foundation for Culture and Civil Society*, Theatre, Item 9). An "easy medium," theatre does not require literacy nor does it need electricity (Norbert Spitz of the Goethe Institute qtd. in Rahman, "Risky revival"). Because of such uses of theatre, a genre without deep roots in Afghanistan culture and historically related to Western reformist projects, the Shakespeare production could easily be conceived as part of this broader project of the restoration of civil society and the inculcation of Western values.

The issue of gender certainly posed a particular problem for Jaber who wished to use women actors as well as men. As has been noted already, one of the characteristics of *Love's Labour's Lost* is that it includes an equal number of leading men and women. But casting Afghan women in the play proved to be a major headache. French director Ariane Mnouchkine, who a few months earlier had conducted a theatre workshop on the theme of forced marriage in Kabul, grimly noted that it was nothing short of "simple heroism" for a young woman to appear on the public stage "because it means that she is a prostitute" (qtd. in "OSI Forum: Reviving Theatre in Afghanistan. A Conversation with Ariane Mnouchkine"). Many men auditioned for the parts but women were scarce. Jaber had difficulty both finding women actors and keeping them in the production. She was glad to track down Marina Gulbahari, the beautiful child star of *Osama*, a film that won a Golden Globe award. When presented with the play script, Gulbahari responded: "I had never heard of Shakespeare before (...) But I like this story from the beginning to the end" (qtd. in "Shakespeare in Kabul; Why, all delights are vain").<sup>25</sup>

One actress was locked out of her home for bringing shame on the family. Her "neighbors suspected her of adultery or prostitution because she was

<sup>24</sup> The citation comes from an article describing the Taliban response to the death of the first Canadian female soldier, Captain Nichola Goddard.

<sup>25</sup> It must have helped that the actors made a small fortune by performing in the play. Bereshna Bahar, one of the actors, often went hungry under the Taliban. For this (eventually) British Council-backed production, the actors earned \$600. See "Shakespeare in Kabul; Why, all delights are in vain").

coming home after sunset owing to long rehearsals” (Coghlan, “Afghanistan brings back the Bard”). Parween Mooshtael (Fatima) also received death threats for continuing to pursuing her chosen career of acting (Coghlan, “Afghanistan brings back the Bard”).<sup>26</sup> Jaber was comforted by the fact that two of the female actors, Breshna Bahar (Maryam/Maria) and Saba Sahar (Shadokht-e-Herat/Princess), were police officers: “Their street-tough demeanour, which vanished during their regal performances, was essential in getting them through the off-stage hassles” (Landrigan, “Treading the boards”).<sup>27</sup>

By seeking out women to play on stage, Jaber appeared, on the one hand, to present a visible image of what Afghan society could be (that is, like Western society, with normalized gender relations) and, on the other, to insensitively spurn ingrained Afghan traditions of modesty, leading to their possible destruction. This was a potentially dangerous move and one certainly open to serious critique. Jaber was aware of the necessity of maintaining the delicate balance between permitting women on stage and yet not to making them offensive. She commented, after one of the performances, “It was a challenge to put men and women together and not make it saucy or offensive, but I think it worked” (qtd. in Morarjee, “Kabul laughs as Shakespeare’s labours are not lost”).

Interestingly, one of the other major difficulties Jaber faced was finding money to finance the production. She attempted to persuade different sources that theatre was essentially part of the process of the normalization of cultural life in Afghanistan, and thus an essential element in creating civil society. At first, the British Council had little interest in the project and, in fact, instructed its local representative not to fund it. The Americans had no wish to support a playwright who was not American. The production was saved only at the last minute when the British Council representative in Kabul, Richard Weyers, decided to defy London’s instructions. On the last day of his mandate, he issued the directive to write a cheque for the production (the equivalent of around \$15,000), since it would have been “remiss” not to support Shakespeare (Landrigan, Telephone conversation, 7 July 2010). Additional funding was obtained from the Goethe Institute (in a reminder of the German influence on Afghan theatre in the 1970s) and from a personal friend of Jaber, Vincent Deforges.

Thus, at least some of the same obstacles encountered by Western theatre groups (which attempt to “sell” the importance of culture to politicians and others) pertained. Although the theatre artists’ published media comments suggested that the connection between theatre productions and rebuilding civil society was both obvious and acknowledged (especially in the use of theatre as

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<sup>26</sup> The situation significantly deteriorated since 2006. See Bradshaw. Note that he spells Mooshtael’s name as Mushathel. In this essay, however, I have followed the spelling found in the program for the Kabul production of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*.

<sup>27</sup> Saba Sahar owns a film company and is well-known across Afghanistan (Omar, E-mail, 13 July 2010).

“beneficial propaganda”), they may have been publicly “protesting too much” in the hopes of gaining financial support that was not easy to obtain in 2005 and, that has, since, become even more scarce.

### “With Some Strange Pastime Solace Them”: The Audience

The production played for five nights to sold-out performances. In his article in *The Guardian*, Landrigan described the opening night as follows:

We have seating for 120, but more than 350 show up. We have to turn away 150 more, attracted by local media coverage. On the roofs of the mud huts that rise up the hill behind the garden, children break off from flying kites to look down in curiosity. The actors enter nervously, but everything that went wrong in rehearsals comes together. The first few minutes are tentative, but when the first funny line arrives, a small laugh ripples through the audience. As the humor builds, so does the response, and 45 minutes in the audience is laughing uncontrollably.

Attending the premiere was an audience that was Elizabethan-like in its diversity: members of the Afghan royal family, the French ambassador, students, builders restoring the gardens, as well as other diplomats, aid workers, local residents, journalists, cabinet ministers, soon-to-be-parliamentarians, businessmen, students, and a warlord (Landrigan, E-mail, 20 May 2006). The 200 Afghan men who had “waited stone-faced for the performance to begin” (Barker, “Bard back in Kabul”) laughed during the performance and seemed to enjoy the play, but questioned whether it was really necessary for the actors to hold hands at the end (there had been no touching during the course of the performance). Westerners, however, were “unreserved” in their praise.<sup>28</sup>

The following evening and a half hour before the show was to begin, the same scene was repeated. Men who had seen the premiere and found “nothing anti-Islamic or un-Islamic in the play” returned with wives and daughters (Omar, E-mail, 13 July 2010). After local media coverage, many hundreds attempted to get into a space meant for less than 300. The doors of The Foundation had to be locked and people were disappointedly turned away. Of those who saw the production, about forty were Afghan women.

The fifth night was the most remarkable. This was the night in which the performance was set in the park. Street kids and local residents also turned out. Hundreds packed into the park to view the show. From a distance, on the hills, even more watched. Workmen who were reconstructing the gardens stayed to

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, coverage in “Shakespeare in Kabul; Why, all delights are vain”.

watch, glued to the performance that seemed like some film in which women wore “flashy costumes” (Jaber, Telephone conversation, 1 Aug 2010). Although they could not hear the words, they were drawn to this special event with its music and living actors. “Everyone loves entertainment”, explained Landrigan (Telephone conversation, 7 July 2010), when asked why people came and what the production meant to them. The simple ability to be able to gather together in the public sphere with little or no fear seemed to signal a change. As an event, the production appeared to be less about the importance of Shakespeare or of gender relations than as a potent symbol of a certain moment in Afghan history: a moment of optimism, even elation.

The performances were interrupted by a few distractions such as mobile phones, honking cars, and the noise of planes passing overhead. At one point, a child wandered across the stage (Barker, “Bard back in Kabul”). Midway through the first performance, the divisions between the past and present were clearly marked when, from a nearby mosque, the Islamic evening call to prayer wafted over the audience. *USA Today* reported that “Few stirred, engrossed in the unfolding drama” (Munita, “Shakespeare plays”), while *The Economist* interpreted the audience as falling “guiltily silent” (“Shakespeare in Kabul; Why, all delights are vain”). But many others heeded the sound of the azan, “got up from where they were seated, went to the far side of the old palace grounds where [the actors] were performing, laid out their mats, said their evening prayers, then came back and took their seats again” (Landrigan, Telephone conversation, 7 July 2010), suggesting that it was possible to accommodate Shakespeare to Afghan traditions.<sup>29</sup>

### “We Are Much Delighted”: *Love’s Labour Lost*, Art, And Propaganda

The international, national, and local impact of the production was considerable if perhaps not lasting. *Love’s Labour’s Lost* was well-covered by the local media which flashed video clips and photos of men and women together on the stage around the country and the world. From Taipei to Toronto, the media harped on four themes: the oddness of performing Shakespeare in Afghanistan; the conditions of great social duress under which the production was undertaken; the fact that women were on stage; and that Shakespeare may not only have relevance for a new and culturally distant audience, but also that his works may mean in a new and potent way.

Locally, according to Landrigan, “There was no negative reaction, as we feared there might be. Thus, one more strand, and an important one, was woven into the fabric of civil society. (...) The fact that large numbers of people who

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<sup>29</sup> In replying to my query about this moment in the production, Omar simply responded that it was only problematic insofar as people moving from the first five rows disturbed other people who did not pray. When they returned, some of the seats were taken by those who had been standing in the back. He did not believe that there was any clash of cultures (E-mail, 13 July 2010).

had gathered for the show and readily accepted men and women together was a major breakthrough” (E-mail, 20 May 2006). Jaber prepared to take the production to northern Afghanistan, a conservative region. Afghan National TV also proposed to tape the show to ensure that people across the country would be able to share the experience. For those without television sets, Afghan TV intended to bring mobile units with screens to rural and isolated communities. Gender issues broached in the production would thus “enter the public discourse nationally” (Landrigan, E-mail, 20 May 2006).

In Kabul, the capital, the immediate reaction to the Shakespeare production was also a powerful one. Many Afghans had never seen live theatre before, had never seen women and men acting together, and had never heard of Shakespeare.<sup>30</sup> The Soviet invasion, followed by the Taliban rule, had destroyed the younger generations’ knowledge about poetry outside of Afghanistan. Theatre, especially for younger Afghans, was a special revelation and suggested another way of speaking about themselves, their desires, and identities. Most were delighted with the comic routines. A number were surprised to discover the poetry of Shakespeare; they had not known that such a rich poetic tradition existed outside of Afghanistan. The production caused a run on Shakespeare texts, as Kabul University students bought up all the copies of Shakespeare in all available languages.

The actors who had had such difficulty bringing any emotions to the fore were, by the end of the play – like the audience – “swept up in its sadness” (Landrigan, E-mail, 23 May 2006). They spontaneously broke into tears when the lovers were faced with imminent separation. After weeks of rehearsals, they were finally comfortable enough with each other to laugh, joke, sing, and cry together. More than a release of sentimentality, their response may have been a mark of the recognition of their changed gender relations as well as an acknowledgement of the forces of mutability; tragedy might still intervene.

Afghan playwrights showed little public perturbation at the re-introduction of Shakespeare. Playwright Aziz Elyas<sup>31</sup> was simply delighted that more and more shows were taking place, a mark of Kabul’s revival as a cultural centre after such a long drought.<sup>32</sup> Theatre productions were among the few communal events that extended beyond the family and were much anticipated. The ability to be out, in the public sphere, was a major delight.

But, the perennial problem of funding recurred. Touring plans for the summer of 2006 were curtailed to two other performances. Because, at first, the governor of Herat refused permission, the company travelled to Mazar-e-Sharif.

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<sup>30</sup> For example, Safia Omari (twenty-two-years old) who was one of the small group of women in the audience (qtd. in Barker, “Bard back in Kabul”). Rafi Aria, a twenty-four-year-old wedding and television singer was delighted with the (to him) new art form: “I loved it” (qtd. in Morarjee, “Kabul laughs as Shakespeare’s labours are not lost”).

<sup>31</sup> His *History is Witness* recently won first prize at the Kabul Theatre Summer Festival.

<sup>32</sup> Aziz, “There’s starting to be more and more shows being put on now. It’s wonderful” (qtd. in “Shakespeare plays in Kabul encourage peace and love”).

In each of these cities, the composition of the audience and its response was different.<sup>33</sup> Before the tour, disaster struck as the husband of Sabah Sahar, who played the Princess, refused to permit her to travel. A substitute had to be found very quickly. In Mazar, two of the actors, Nabi Tanha and Bereshna Buqar, well-known for their roles in Afghan film, were mobbed by admirers and well-wishers, and had to hide in a hotel before the performance. It seemed, in fact, that the show might not go on because of the local enthusiasm expressed for the two actors. By some counts, over 1,000 people tried to see the free production, but only a tiny handful of women who, after arriving in burqas and bravely positioning themselves in the front row, were soon escorted out, perhaps by a later arriving male relative.

The all-male audience seemed to enjoy the performance and laughed at the Bollywood satire, but their mood shifted when the women actors came on stage and were greeted by some shouting insults in Dari. Some started to lose interest and leave as the play began to explore the romantic themes. At the end of the performance, as Omar describes it,

some of the audience ran to the actors for the autographs. Neither NATO soldiers nor Afghan soldiers could hold them. There were too many people and it was out of control. With a few Afghan soldiers, I had to push all the actors one by one in the cars, asked the driver to drive fast. (E-mail, 13 July 2010)

In Herat, the production was staged in front of a magnificent citadel originally constructed by Timur-e-Lang (Tamburlane): “Its soaring arches and towering parapets provided a setting such as *LLL* has probably never had before” (Landrigan, E-mail, 3 July 2006), and was entirely appropriate to a play set in a park and before a great castle. Jacob Baynham evoked the mood of the place:

The towering mud and straw flanks of Herat’s old citadel in western Afghanistan have seen the rise and fall of a thousand years’ worth of Central Asian empires. They have protected noble kings, been damaged by bloodthirsty armies and served as a refuge for weary travelers on the Silk Road.... Standing next to a rusting rocket launcher in one of the towers of Herat’s citadel, one has a commanding view over the city

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<sup>33</sup> Sylvène Gilchrist of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) filmed the Mazar performance, airing it as a documentary on “The Passionate Eye” program series (22 December 2006) and focusing on Corinne Jaber as the Canadian connection. I would like to thank her for providing me with a copy of the DVD of the documentary. She also kindly spoke, via Skype, on the topic to conference participants of the Wartime Shakespeare in a Global Context/Shakespeare au temps de la guerre conference on 20 September 2009. <[www.wartimeshakespeare.uottawa.ca](http://www.wartimeshakespeare.uottawa.ca)>.

that once, in terms of culture and the arts, knew few equals.  
 (“Shakespeare in Kabul”)

Space constraints permitted only 250 invited guests; however, of these there was a large number (approximately 30%) of women, perhaps a reflection of the tradition of educating women in that particular city. The show, however, was not as successful as the Kabul premier and was criticized for allowing female actors to show their hair in public. This occurred because there was no tent, as there had been in Kabul, where the women could “disguise” themselves in order to fool the men. The Bollywood scene was also not as well received as in the capital. Although warned about the probability of a negative audience reaction, two actors decided to bear their chests in that scene (something they had done in the other performances). Instead of uproarious laughter, they were greeted with silence. Shah Mohammed Noori (playing the King) remarked that, while the play was adapted for an Afghan audience, it “still approached the limits of what was acceptable in Islam” (Baynham, “Shakespeare in Kabul”). The minister of education left in the middle of the performance; Noori explained that this was probably because he was a close friend of the previous warlord and conservative governor of Herat who continued to wield “great power in the city” (Baynham, “Shakespeare in Kabul”). On the other hand, “A few Afghan illiterate soldiers” who were responsible for security “were so moved by the play, they came near the platform where the actors did most of the first scene, stood there until the end of the play” (Omar, E-mail, 13 July 2010).

The production then geared up for a tour of England and the Festival of Muslim Cultures in 2007 but financial woes continued and the production came to an abrupt end. By 2009, the war made it impossible to stage productions safely in the open air. Although some theatre artists continue to attend workshops in the West and Jaber continues to work with Afghans on other productions, it has become too dangerous to repeat the open air experience of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* with men and women together on stage. The plight of women has also become more acute. In the case of the actors, threats against Mooschatael (who had played Fatima) continued. In 2008, her husband was lured out of his house and shot dead in the street in 2008. Soon after, she escaped with her small children to Pakistan, and then found asylum in Canada.

### “Out, Out Brief Candle”?

It is hard to predict whether the Shakespeare event in Kabul will be remembered as a marker of a certain cultural moment – of the first blush of elation at the possibility of progress or change; as a window opening on to another art form and another culture; as a revival of forgotten indigenous forms; as a cultural exchange – or as perhaps just another, brief moment of foreign-inspired and failed reformist efforts to change Afghans.



As Western scholars, we have, over the past three decades, become more and more attuned to the cost of “civilizing” the world and have become less naïve about an unconditionally welcoming response to the imposition of Western values. It is an issue that continues to perturb – particularly in wartime conditions, where the Western presence is, by many, conceived as an occupant rather than a liberator or peacemaker. The place of Shakespeare in other cultures continues to absorb interest and finds its way into various discussions, as, for example, in the exchange in *The Guardian Weekly* between Gary Taylor and Dominic Dromgoole. Diking it out over the now rather hackneyed issue of Shakespeare’s universality, Taylor argued that foreign companies perform Shakespeare only

in order to demonstrate that they, too, can appropriate the flagship commodity of the world’s most powerful culture. They want to increase their own cultural capital by insuring that consumers associate their brand-name with ‘Shakespeare’. (21)<sup>34</sup>

While acknowledging that this may be true in some cases, we need not hold completely to this cynical, material view. The theatre event is rarely straightforward; inspirations for and consequences of theatrical events often exceed or overflow political agendas, director’s, translator’s, and actors’ intentions. The desire to acquire Shakespeare *only* because his acquisition would permit Afghan entry to membership in the high table of European culture does not seem to fit easily with the narrative of the creation and reception of this particular production in Kabul – not least, because of Afghans’ high estimation of their own cultural traditions. As has been noted above, one of the responses was surprise at the fact that the West also has some quite fine poets that might be worth reading.

As Ania Loomba observes, we should be careful not to underrate the strength of and resilience of native cultures, nor to displace or simplify native responses to the foreign. Local conditions (including different audiences and locations) also need to be taken into account. In a similar vein, Angel Rama and Fernando Ortiz have emphasized “cultural plasticity” – the energy of the cultural community which chooses to take up a foreign text, while Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reminds us that questions about international cultural exchanges need “to be kept alive, not answered too quickly” (239). For his part, Michael Bristol urges that we “set out a way of reading that will help to bridge the gap between the conservative demand for unreflective affirmation of the ideals and achievements of Western civilization and the equally unhelpful oppositional programs of compulsive resistance and critique” (146).

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<sup>34</sup> On the opposite of the debate and on the same page was Dominic Dromgoole, “Welcome to Will’s World”.

In our historically-conscious desire not to repeat the mistakes of the past, we may ourselves be creating too clear a demarcation between what is “imposed” and what is invited. Not without reason, Susan Sontag advises scholars to walk a fine line: “on the one hand, to promote dialogue, skepticism about received ideas, and resistance to nationalist or tribal ideas masquerading as ‘ideals’; on the other hand, to refuse the facile discrediting of ‘idealism’, of altruism itself, of high standards of all kinds” (297). Commenting on this passage, Susan Rubin Suleiman remarks upon the difficulty but continuing pertinence of this task: both to reject false ideals while also rejecting “the rejection of idealism and universal values ...” (838).

And so, to answer the question, “Was Shakespeare used as propaganda and as Western imperialist material?” this paper, in detailing various aspects of the preparation and reception of this production, responds both “yes” and “no.” Yes, the production was linked (whether accurately, successfully, intentionally, or not) to attempts to change Afghan society; to influence concepts of gender relations; and to bring in Western theatrical forms and values. Because the play was performed on the grounds of The Foundation, the production could be perceived to have its support and thus to be part of the “beneficial propaganda” carried out elsewhere (as, for example, the previously-mentioned topical, political plays circulated throughout the country).

And yet. Like the excited moments of hope that the media recorded since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the production of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* is also a symptomatic marker of a particular moment of optimism in Afghan history. Shakespeare was brought to the stage almost despite, not because of, Western political interest in the project. And he was also brought to the stage because of human considerations: actors wanted good roles, Jaber enjoyed Shakespeare, and wanted what Charles Marowitz called “playable values” (162). As Jaber remarked in the CBC documentary about this production, the point of a play is to tell a story, to make actors and audiences “more alive”, to enrich their lives, if only for a moment. Omar’s response to the production seems to confirm Jaber’s view. He commented,

Shakespeare plays: I think they play more with ears, emotions, and innermost feelings than with eyes. Once throughout a performance, I kept my eyes closed. I enjoyed that performance more than other times. It was like I was seeing it in my dream, a perfect dream, where everything happens the way you want, like a fantasy, where everything is possible, easy, and fairy-like. (E-mail, 13 July 2010)

We might turn to yet other voice in considering the impact of this Shakespeare production on Afghanistan. Robin Sloan, the British playwright at the forefront of “verbatim theatre” – a documentary-style subgenre of political theatre and author of *Talking to the Terrorists* – has claimed to have discovered

the “secret of political theatre”: never start with politics. “You’ll only write a political play by writing a human play, a play about humanity. If you do that, you’ll end up with a more political play than the one you wanted” (qtd. in Al-Solaylee R1). Perhaps the unexpected human response of actors and audience to the Kabul production of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* – the laughter, the tears – may be its central event, the only thing that people will remember.

Sloan’s conviction about what moves people echoes an earlier argument made by Kenneth Burke who explored our contradictory responses to the relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical, the propagandistic and the artistic:

A human war, picturing gentleness, companionship, humor, respect for courage (in the enemy as well as among one’s own ranks), dignity in suffering, refusal to admire the jockeyings and elbowings in position which characterize so much of our efforts under conditions of capitalist peace – such a human picture might be less likely to encourage the hysteria which, in its intensity, can be converted into its antithesis at a moment’s notice, becoming the counter-hysteria of rabidity and ferocity. It may really serve to promote, not warlike zest, but a cultural approach towards the question of human happiness, a sense of critical appraisal, and incidentally, a realization that the purposes of humanity may best be attained through the machinery of peace. (240)

Writing during the early years of the Second World War, Burke was strongly attuned to the seductiveness of affect. He understood that propagandistic war plays may easily be turned inside out when “tribal” interests are at stake. “It is,” he wrote,

questionable whether the feelings of horror, repugnance, hatred would furnish the best groundwork as a deterrent to war. They are extremely militaristic attitudes (...). And they might well provide the firmest basis upon which the ‘heroism’ of a new war could be erected. The greater the horror, the greater the thrill and honor of enlistment. (239)

Prescient thoughts, written in 1941.

Affirming the “momentousness” of the relationship between art and society (235), Burke acknowledged that the issue of the relation between art and propaganda is not “purely a haggle among literary specialists” but a “vital” issue, since it is “no academic matter to concern oneself with the implication of books” (234). We may extend this to the art of theatre. Perhaps the adaptation of

a play about love is indeed simultaneously the most political, most cultural (in Burke's sense of the word), and trivial of events.

Theatre, adaptation, and translation have variously and similarly been described as dialogue, negotiation, encounter, gateway to culture, and exchange. Translation – much more than a literal rendering from one language to another, rather an exchange of codes and ideas – also has a long pedigree as the catalyst for revolutionary activity (one has only to think about Luther's translation of the Bible). What all of these metaphors and claims suggest is that culture is always “in action” since it is neither a completed product nor an “object frozen in space and time. Thus relations between cultures are a complex interaction of entities which are in a permanent process of negotiating their identity” (Watson 3). What the identity of Afghan culture will be, we cannot say; Afghans will decide. But the June 2006 bombing of a busload of Afghan translators<sup>35</sup> – at the forefront of cultural mediation – shows how important this topic remains.

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<sup>35</sup> Reported in the Western media on Thursday, 15 June 2006.



Fig. 1. *Love's Labor's Lost* in Afghanistan. Photo by Kate Brooks.



Fig. 2. *Love's Labor's Lost* in Afghanistan. Photo by Kate Brooks.



Fig. 3. *Love's Labor's Lost* in Afghanistan. Photo by Kate Brooks



Fig. 4. *Love's Labor's Lost* in Afghanistan. Photo by Kate Brooks.

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