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Andrew Garrod

“O Bottom, Thou Art Translated”: Directing a Bilingual *Dream* in the Marshall Islands

A unique production of Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream was staged in early 2004 by students of the Marshall Islands High School, Majuro, in the Central Pacific. The play's director, Andrew Garrod, describes the rehearsal process and performance of the play, in which the school students were supported by undergraduates from the Education Department of Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, spending a term teaching in the island's schools. The nature and worth of the learning experienced by the young actors, and their community, are considered in a context where Shakespeare and any kind of dramatic production are little known.

KEY WORDS: Shakespeare; *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Marshall Islands; Learning through drama; Dartmouth College.

Drum beats pulse through the late evening Pacific air. From the grove of banana trees, bare-chested, coconut-oiled, grass-skirted spirits—boy fairies in Oberon's train—emerge with staves in hand, stalking their prey. Across the length of the open theatre, in the shadow of a breadfruit tree, lurks Titania's band of girl fairies, ready for battle. The warring parties, crouching low, exchange taunting glares and then explode into a stylized Fijian fight dance on stage. “Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania!” spits Oberon at his former mistress.

We are in the world of fairies, mechanicals, and courtiers who people Shakespeare's most popular romantic comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The stage is the Marshall Islands High School, located in Majuro, the capital of this Central Pacific island nation—an improbable republic made up of more than a thousand small coral islands spread over nearly a million square miles of ocean.

Barker, *Bravo for the
Marshallese*

Hanley, Los Angeles
Times, 16 May 2004

In the consciousness of most North Americans, and I suspect many Europeans, “Bikini” is the one word that comes to mind when one thinks of the Marshall islands—Bikini, the formerly idyllic but now contaminated atoll at the northern fringe of this archipelago. During the early years of the Cold War, on March 1, 1954, the United States detonated “Bravo”—the largest nuclear bomb the U.S. has ever dropped, sending “giant mushroom clouds that grew to 25 miles in diameter”¹—on the isolated and apparently insignificant Bikini atoll. The Bikinians, who were persuaded by the U.S. government to sacrifice their atoll “for the good of mankind” and leave the islands for their own safety, have since yearned for the home they were forced to evacuate, having lived in the intervening years like the children of Israel wandering in the desert², in temporary homes on remote islands. The physical devastation and the psychological, economic, and cultural trauma, wrought throughout the island nation cannot be underestimated. The 67 tests conducted in the Marshall Islands, then a U.S. protectorate under the United Nations, amounted to a megatonnage dropped on the islands “equal to 1.6 Hiroshima atomic bombs a day for 12 years.”³ This history of nuclear testing left a painful legacy, which includes a per capita GDP of approximately \$1100, making the Republic of the Marshall Islands one of the poorest nations in Micronesia.

Since the year 2000, Dartmouth College’s Education Department has been sending undergraduates each winter to teach in the public schools of this nation. More recently, the college has placed 15 undergraduate teachers in total on the country’s remote atolls and islands as well as in the capital. The Dartmouth teachers, working in relentless heat and high humidity in under-resourced schools, engage with the island students whom they come to care for immensely. The island teenagers, in turn, grow attached to their American student instructors whom they trust as mentors. The undergraduates teach regular classes and run active extracurricular programs—chess clubs, choir groups, basketball, volleyball, and college preparation sessions. This year they became the production staff for a highly ambitious bilingual rendition of Shakespeare’s *Dream*. The island children had not acted in a play before, nor were they acquainted with live theater.

I directed many high school productions as a Canadian high school teacher in the 1960s and 1970s—including 12 Shakespearean productions—but I had never embarked on a challenge quite as all-consuming. While suggestive of neither the Forest of Arden or even Illyria, Majuro, with its coconut and pandanus trees, banana groves, and bougainvillea, and always the sound of water lapping in the lagoon, offered intimations of *The Dream’s* magical and haunted

woods. In this remote tropical setting, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with its blend of romance, generational conflict, adolescent passion, magic, and comedy seemed both absolutely right and potentially viable.

Freedman, New York
Times, 18 Aug 2004

“Why Shakespeare?” a skeptic might ask, particularly since Shakespeare is never studied in the islands’ schools and the conventions of Elizabethan English and dramatic verse are entirely alien here. “Isn’t this a culturally imperialistic choice?” In the view of Kurt Wootton, a Rhode Island teacher of inner-city high school students, “high culture is not the oppressor” of the less advantaged; it can be seen as “an agent of their liberation.”⁴ Part of the play’s allure for me was the beauty and challenge of its language along with the diversity of character, tone, and mood, and the opportunity to employ a large cast onstage and numerous helpers backstage. I knew that teasing out the meanings of the play and rehearsing it would require countless conversations and interactions with the students, but felt that using and explaining English idiom and language would enhance the students’ command of their second language. Another great comic poet, Aristophanes, believed that the dramatist should not only offer pleasure, but should, besides that, be a teacher of morality and a political advisor. I was determined that *The Dream* could achieve all these admirable goals. I hoped it would reduce the students’ fear of public speaking in the classroom and foster a love of reading. More importantly, I also believed that the mastery of a great and celebrated work would enormously increase their pride and sense of accomplishment. The morale of the public school, which often sees itself as second fiddle to the well-respected Catholic high school, was also riding on a triumphant conclusion for the production.

Mechelli, BBC News
World Edition

As director, certain principles guided me. First, I decided that the play must be bilingual. My primary aim was to show respect for both Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter verse and the vitality of the native language, Marshallese. I was also aware of the great challenges that Shakespeare’s language poses and the modest competency in spoken and written English of the Marshallese children. English is the language of instruction in the schools, yet by most assessments, Marshallese children are four or five years behind their American counterparts in reading and comprehension by grade 12. I felt sure that parents and teachers would be proud to see their children move effortlessly between the two languages.⁵ The cast initially read the play in its entirety in Barron’s simplified version, which renders the complete text in prose. Subsequently, all parts to be performed in Shakespeare’s language were rehearsed using the original verse and speech. (I did cut about 700 lines from the final production). With the aid of Mark Stege, a skillful translator and the son of the Secretary

of Education in the Marshall Islands, we translated all the comic characters' dialogue into Marshallese, along with their interactions with fairies and courtiers. The choice of which parts to translate and which parts to retain was not a choice reflecting some sort of caste system; rather, it was dictated by what Shakespeare had written in verse and prose. The translation of Shakespeare's verse into Marshallese prose would have offered a formidable challenge and, in any case, the humor of the mechanicals' shenanigans would be much more accessible in the native tongue.

Here are the opening lines of the first meeting of Peter Quince's group as they plan what will become the "tedious brief scene of young Pyramus and his love Thisby." I have put Shakespeare's words in italics (which were not delivered) under the Marshallese words which were actually spoken in performance. So that the reader may get an impression of the sound of the Marshallese language, I place a transliteration under the first three Marshallese lines.

Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Act I, Scene II

Quince Kwe, La-Nick Bottom, kwoj La-Pyramus.
 (Kway, La-Nick Bottom, kwesh la-Pyramus.)
 You, Nick Bottom, are set down for Pyramus.



Figure 1. Pyramus (Francis Hicking) leans forward to kiss Thisbe (Ramson Kios) through a chink in the wall.

Bottom Won in La-Pyramus? Ej juon ri-belele ke juon ritarinae?
(Wen een la-Pyramus? Esh j'won ree-belaylay kay j'won reetareenay?)
What is Pyramus? A Lover, or a Tyrant?

Quince Juon ri-belele, eo im enaj kabuloñloñ an man e make ilo an buromej e lio beleen.
(Jewon ree-belaylay, yo eem aynash kaboolonglong an man ey makey celo an booromaysh ey leeo beyleen.)
A Lover that kills himself, most gallant, for Love.

Bottom Aet, inaj, aikwuji buul jañ ilo ao kamane bwe en emman. Ien eo iman io make, en kab jan rialooj rane. I naj katoor dren in meja enwot ke e wot im jauroor lan. Botab, I makede lok adrin ritarinae ilo juon skit. I meroñ adrin beñbeñ en Hercules, ak enwot juon eo im elap an kamijak, bwe aolep ren mijak eo.

That will ask some Tears in the true Performing of it. If I do it, let the Audience look to their Eyes. I will move Storms; I will condole, in some measure. To the rest yet, my chief Humour is for a Tyrant. I could play Ercles rarely, or a part to tear a cat in, to make all split.

The raging rocks,
And shivering shocks
Shall break the locks
Of prison gates.
The sun, bright star,
Shall shine from afar
And make and mar
The foolish fates.

Elap an eman ao meron komone! Aet, kio kur arimej rane jet ilo skit in.
*This was lofty. Now name the rest of the Players*⁶

The mechanicals practiced for weeks in simplified English before they moved on to the Marshallese translation of their lines.⁷ The unbounded delight and hysterical laughter that accompanied the first rehearsal in the actors' own language was palpable. When I sensed their joy, I knew the play would work.

Shakespeare wrote plays primarily to be seen as well as heard, but visual illusion was not paramount. However, as Harley Granville-Barker reminds us in his preface to this play, "the eye must be satisfied. It has been taught to add its gains to the sum of emotions a play can excite."⁸ My second principle, then—intimately connected to the first principle—was that the play must succeed as spectacle. The Marshallese in the audience would be severely challenged in following the students' heavily accented rendering of Shakespeare's iambic verse, while the *Ri-belles* (a local term for whites—literally, "those who own things") would follow little of the Marshallese portions, although many might have some familiarity with the play from earlier days. Therefore, music, song, dance, movement, lighting and pace would have to rivet the audience's attention. The words of the Chorus in Shakespeare's *Henry V* urging the spectators to "Piece

Granville-Barker, *More Prefaces to Shakespeare*

Shakespeare, *Henry V*

out our imperfections with your thoughts",⁹ were not entirely persuasive for me! Accordingly, the "unworthy scaffold" (a green, wooden, apron stage) would have to be an outdoor stage set in a lush grove of banana and coconut trees, with multiple levels on which the action could unfold. Various dances—Theseus and Hippolyta's betrothal dance at the play's start; a fight dance that was a prelude to Oberon and Titania's first encounter; and a blessing, danced "trippingly", that accompanied the consecration of the Iroij's (Duke's) Palace—were choreographed in Fijian style by the school's science teacher, Aseena Ketedromo. The boy fairies enthusiastically embraced the jagged movements of the fight dance, full of kicks, jabs, and guttural exhalations, but hesitated to engage in the betrothal dance, with its gentler rhythms and graceful arm and hand movements. However, this hesitation evaporated when Theseus—played by Marzuq Muhammed, a 6'3" African-American Dartmouth College football player—led the way in the dance and offered the boys manly reassurance!

The play's dance music was complemented by original music written by another Dartmouth student James Redfield for the Act II Scene II fairy song "Philomel." As James explained to me:

I didn't change any of Shakespeare's words in writing 'Philomel'- my problem was to set the song to a harmony and melody that would resonate with the students and the audience. So I simplified the song to basic chords that were similar to Marshallese music, using a melody I happened to hear in my head while I was walking home one day. The best part of the writing and rehearsing process came on the two days before the performance, when the students shyly confessed to me that there was "something wrong" with the harmony they had been singing (although it sounded lovely to me!) and asked me to "change the song." Somewhat flustered, I decided to change the key to G, in which most Marshallese songs seem to be written. As soon as I struck the chords their faces lit up. They immediately began to sing a full, almost overpoweringly loud harmony to Shakespeare's words, using the harmonies they had intuitively learned from their own culture's music.

James' adaptation made the song more consonant with the dances and the meaning of Shakespeare's poetry, and thus more available to the audience.

My third principle was to make the play accessible and immediate to the island context, so we essentially "Marshallized" the play: made costumes and references relevant to the islands, changed the Duke of Athens to the *Iroij of Kabinwor*, and Hippolyta to the *Leroij of Liklal*. The boy fairies, attendant on Oberon, became *Nonieps*, Marshallese spirits of the underground. Titania's girl fairies became *Lerro*, and Puck metamorphosed into *Letao* (a *dri-anijuij*, a magic worker), the infamous trickster in Marshallese mythology. Among



Figure 2. Puck/Letao (Cuttly Wase) bids farewell to the audience... “If we shadows have offended...”

the mechanicals there was some job-shifting to reflect island occupations. Francis Flute became a cook, Snug a coconut husker (copra, made from coconuts, is a central part of the islands’ economy), and Tom Snout a canoe builder. I selected Marzuq Muhammed, the student playing Theseus, and Vinny Ng, the Chinese Canadian Dartmouth student playing Oberon, (the only two non-Marshallese students in the production) for their leadership abilities and for their modeling of verse speaking. They spoke many lines in the local language and their brave attempt at Marshallese brought down the house. As Marzuq observed to me, it was not until he attempted to master a limited number of lines in Marshallese that he realized how heroic the effort was of the the Marshallese students in tackling Shakespeare’s verse.

Each rehearsal began with 30 minutes dedicated to warm-up exercises run by Vinny Ng, who was one of my assistant directors. While I focused on the linguistic and emotional understanding of the text, Vinny worked on role-playing, team work, trust, improvisation, and emotional exaggeration by using theater games and exercises. Most of the games were warm-up activities—essentially ice breakers—drawn from Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Boal’s ideas and approaches have been used across the world to create community dialogue around issues of social oppression and conflict

resolution. The hurdles we faced were manifold, and rehearsals for the play had plenty of problems. The major challenge was undoubtedly working with a cast for whom English was a second language—without facility in Marshallese myself, I was never quite sure what they understood. Instructions were stated explicitly, repeated, and rephrased, often to the actors' puzzlement. Even monosyllabic verbs could trip up the unwary director and actor—"dote" being a striking example. The cornucopia of detail in Shakespeare's presentation of the natural world did not resonate with students who lived on a 30-mile by 1/3-mile coral atoll no higher than 10 feet above sea level—no "oxslips and nodding violets" here, no "sweet musk roses" or "eglantyne." Shakespeare's fauna seemed no more familiar; no Marshallese student had ever seen a horse or a donkey, so the object of Titania's fancy required explication.

Cultural expectations of time-keeping also posed unsuspected challenges: in a culture where everything is run on "island time,"(that is, nothing occurs on time) convincing sun-dazed students to show up for after-school rehearsal required ingenuity. Punctual attendance and total commitment to a project seemed almost alien demands. Only the bravest student would engage day after day with the intricacies of Shakespeare's fertile imagination and metaphorical speeches, which were not only expressed in a foreign language, but a late 16th century version of it that is frequently inaccessible to those fluent in English. I was never quite sure, even on the nights of dress rehearsals and performances, that all the cast would materialize. Invariably they did—with two notable exceptions. Hermia mysteriously absented herself from the final dress rehearsal. Only when I saw her the next day with her face corrugated with deep scratches—the product of a fight with another girl over a boy—did I realize how entirely the young actress was taking on the role of Hermia! I cautioned her not to take too much to heart one of Hermia's ripostes to Helena, "How low am I? I am not yet so low/But that my nails can reach unto thine eyes." Fifteen minutes after the designated curtain time for the penultimate performance, Marzuq bicycled around the island to knock on doors, looking for our Egeus—who had apparently overslept. In a traditionally shy culture, encouraging the students playing Hermia and Helena to look each other in the eye as they exchanged insults in the wood was especially taxing. Cultural mores dictated that I recast the girl originally selected to play Titania to another role, since her second cousin was playing Bottom, the object of her romantic interest, and undertones of incest were unacceptable, even within the dramatic context. The notion of "role" seemed alien, as I saw little evidence of role-playing in the islanders' childhood games.



Figure 3. Lysander (Jason Cenicola) expresses his newfound love for Helena (Yolalyn Mares).

Nevertheless, we slowly made progress as the actors gained confidence, came to understand the emotional subtext, and made the words their own. In his journal, Vinny wrote movingly of the progress of the ninth grade student Cutty Wase who played Puck/*Letao*.

During Cutty's first practice I remember him really struggling to pronounce, let alone understand, any of Puck's lines. We had cast him in a big role despite his being one of the weaker English speakers. He was relatively shy, timid, afraid to speak up in class, yet he had a spark of curiosity, a desire to learn, and a willingness to take risks. I worked with him a lot one-on-one and in the end Cutty was one of the most dependable, improved and effective characters in the play. Ultimately, I found that our relationship cut across both language and cultural barriers.

Cutting across barriers and deepening friendships between the student actors and the Dartmouth production staff helped to ameliorate many of the cultural disparities.

Because of language difficulties, I was compelled to be much more didactic than I would have liked in directing the students. The eight-week rehearsal time did not allow for a more collaborative, sensitive approach to the actors' feelings about character, motivation, relationships, movement, gestures, and the use of space. Therefore, most scenes were precisely choreographed by me. However, once a scene had been rehearsed multiple times, it often

took on a life of its own: Peter Quince's play, performed on the Duke's wedding night, came brilliantly to life as the innate playfulness of the student-mechanicals emerged, fueled by a delighted audience's reaction. After savaging Thisby's mantle, Lion, dressed in spotted underwear with a brilliant marigold lei circling his face and a mop-head sprouting from his crown, strutted with more lion-like gait as the crowd cheered him on. Thisby's knife hovered ever longer in the air each night as, distraught, she moved her eyes between the point of the upraised dagger and her left breast, where "heart doth hop."

Standing behind a banana tree back stage on the night of the final performance, I felt both satisfied and moved. I could hear the audience roar with laughter at the climax of the mechanicals' play, as Thisby, clad in a mumu (an often bulky, puff-sleeved and colorful local dress) and donning a glistening black wig especially imported for the play from Chicago, sobbed in Marshallese as she prepared to stab herself in her left breast after "the suicide" of Pyramus. Across centuries, across cultures, across languages, Shakespeare's reading of human nature, with all its glories and follies, resonated powerfully. The play ran for five packed performances (two of them interrupted by violent rainstorms) and seemed to delight the diverse audiences. For these first time actors, performing Shakespeare had proved to be immensely gratifying and energizing. They were rewarded by the audience's rapturous reception—among them the President of the Marshall Islands, the U.S. Ambassador to the Marshall Islands, ministers and senators, parents, teachers and peers. The students had proved that they could rise to even the most formidable challenge.



Figure 4. The fairies in Oberon and Titania's trains take their curtain call.

“You see,” said an unknown woman trundling her cart around the Pay-Less supermarket when she recognized me, “our kids can do it, can’t they?” “How could you doubt it?” I replied warmly. We, Marshallese and Americans, students and teachers, felt we had created together, in Hippolyta’s words, something “strange and admirable.”

What will the long-term impact of their Shakespearean immersion be on some of these island children? Some talk now of aspirations to be a lawyer, a flight attendant, a pilot, and an actress. “I was searching for a new life,” Yutaka Ishoda (who played Egeus) told me, “I’ve decided what I want to be when I grow up—a lawyer or an actor.” But perhaps even more important than elevating their academic and career goals is the heightened understanding of their own lives that could come from having engaged with a major Shakespearean text. That is what I would wish for them. Learning how to work as a team, sublimating one’s own needs for the good of others, building powerful relationships with peers, undergraduates and their teachers is surely a form of moral education. To the extent that the student-actors have increased their ability to speak and think in English, they are in a position to use their bilingualism to advance both within their own culture and the broader world. Shakespeare is now theirs to “use” as they see fit. Vinny Ng concludes his journal entry for me,

I will always remember Ruland (Demetrius) yelling ‘Shakespeare!’ at the top of his lungs as we sped in an open truck on a jambo ride around town after the last show. It was almost as if he had claimed his own sense of ownership of the whole experience. Shakespeare was no longer something intangible, something abstract, something so distantly academic, but rather Shakespeare was *his*, was Marshallese, was a part of the community that we had all created in the two months we had worked on the project. And this raw connection that every single member of the cast and production team felt could only be summed up in a single word bellowed out shamelessly into the gathering darkness at every passerby,
‘SHAKESPEARE!’

At times, the world of the Marshall Islands and of the *Dream* seems far away from life in the USA with its “getting and spending.” At such times, I feel inclined to go along with Puck and “Think but this, and all is mended/That you have but slumbered here.” For the Dartmouth teachers, the experience of work in Majuro was real enough. They are forever transformed by their immersion in a vastly different geographic, social and cultural landscape—forever altered by eight weeks in which the island children and their Shakespearean production became the focus of their singular and passionate devotion.

Acknowledgments

Andrew Garrod plans to return to the Marshall Islands in 2005, both to work with his Dartmouth students in their classrooms and – at the insistence of the young Marshallese students – to direct *Twelfth Night*. He would like to thank: Dody Riggs and Gail Taylor for reading the manuscript of this article and for their helpful suggestions; Iram Leon for his photographs; and Betsy Hart and Nina Sethi, Dartmouth undergraduates, for their assistance with numerous aspects of the production.

Notes

1. Holly M. Barker, "A Colonial History of the Marshall Islands," *Bravo for the Marshallese: Regaining Control in a Post-Nuclear, Post-Colonial World*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2004. p. 21.
2. Alson Kelen as quoted in Charles J. Hanley, "Islanders Yearn to Return to Bikini Atoll," *Los Angeles Times*. 16 May 2004. p. 1.
3. Charles J. Hanley, "Islanders Yearn to Return to Bikini Atoll," *Los Angeles Times*. 16 May 2004. p. 2.
4. Kurt Wootton as quoted in Samuel Freedman, "Turning to Classics to Stir Troubled Youth," *New York Times*. 18 August 2004.
5. I was aware also of the research by the international scholar Laura-Ann Petitto, who has argued that the acquisition of a second language in childhood enhances cognitive development and in no way detracts from mastery of the first language—a finding similar to recent claims by Andrea Mechelli of the Institute of Neurology at University College, London that learning a second language "boosts" brain-power. See "Learning Languages 'Boosts Brain'" *BBC News World Edition*. 13 October 2004.
6. William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. John F. Andrews, ed., London: Everyman, 1989.
7. The Marshallese language is part of the Micronesian subset of Austronesian language which has its origins in Taiwan thousands of years ago.
8. Harley Granville-Barker, "Preface to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *More Prefaces to Shakespeare*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974. p. 95.
9. William Shakespeare, "Henry V," *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974. p. 936.

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