

# Old Stories to New Places

Shakespeare remains an inexhaustible source of inspiration to overseas filmmakers. **Tony Howard** reviews a Chinese *Hamlet* and a Malagasy *Macbeth*.

Thanks to the initiative shown by the Globe, the Barbican's 'bite' programme and the RSC (in their Complete Works season in 2007), British theatre audiences have been able to rediscover Shakespeare in a wealth of different styles, sounds, ideologies and languages in recent years. The pounding drums of *Umabatha – the Zulu Macbeth* have both attuned us to cultural differences and brought us together in the re-enactment of stories we know but have never understood in quite this way before.

Evolving cinema industries on all continents have also begun to lay claim to the plays and the results are forcing us to rethink the ways in which they can be translated to the screen. Two recent examples are now available on DVD and offer very different perspectives on what 21st-century Shakespeare might become.

*Makibefo*, made in 1999 but only recently released on DVD, was directed by Alexander Abela in an isolated fishing community at the southernmost tip of Madagascar. His film strips *Macbeth* down to a mythic story of crime and retribution and its stark black and white images are profoundly beautiful: faces in close-up against twilight skies; tiny figures pacing vast white beaches; men running into the waves to escape from violence or swooping back on flimsy trimarans to seek revenge. Abela (surprisingly, a former oceanographer born in Coventry) evokes Eisenstein in the pure sculptural force of his photography, and the amateur, almost silent, actors perform with dignity and grace. In one scene, a narrator finds a book in the sand and as well as sketching the story of the warrior's rise and fall, fills in thoughts and emotions by reading Shakespeare's text.

Although this sometimes threatens to reduce the actors to simplified illustrations, the device can be rewarding. When *Makibefo* finds one of his drowned wife's garments in the sand, the voice-over of 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow' we hear while he sits and stares into the ever-present, ever-shifting sea, is hauntingly effective.

The soundtrack is greatly amplified, so the thud of an axe or the click of a soothsayer's pebbles register startlingly, and the sparseness of the villagers' lives suggests a stripped-down existence in which survival merges with dreaming. The tale is plainly told, but on two occasions Abela intercuts between



*Makibefo* (Martin Zia)

scenes. The killing of Banquo (Bakoua) takes place while an ox is bound and butchered in close-up for the coronation feast: both man and animal expire with the same dry, stentorian, outburst of breath. On another occasion, at the very moment that the prophecies warn the new king against Macduff (Makidofy), the latter discovers the queen frozen in a trance, holding a dagger and helps her to her rest.

Although there are moments when *Makibefo* seems externally imposed (why not film material from Madagascar's own myths and history?), it has a unique calm. We hear violence but scarcely ever see it. The protagonist's brutality is oddly innocent and he and his wife are both capable of gentleness. At the start of the film, after

stabbing an enemy, Makibefo carefully wets the man's lips and tends the wound. Later, in an effort to blackmail Makidofy into returning to him, he threatens to kill Makidofy's children in full view of their father. When his threats fail, Makibefo can think of nothing to do except carry out his promise.

All this could not be more different from *The Banquet (Ye Yan)*, directed by Feng Xiaogang and released in 2006. This Chinese adaptation of themes from *Hamlet* is knowing, spectacular and expensive, an epically magnified translation of the story into the historical-fantastic idiom of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Hero*. With a cast of thousands, wire-aided flying duels and palace interiors the size of football stadia, *The Banquet* revels in the idea of desire – repressed, obsessive or deliriously fulfilled in lyrical acrobatic violence. It is packed with masks, worn by actors and warriors and metaphorically by most central characters.

One twist transforms the plot: the Emperor dies and is succeeded by his brother, but the Empress (played by Ziyi Zhang) is haughty, even cruel, and very young: she is the Crown Prince's step-mother and, like Phaedra, is in love with him. The Prince flees to a bamboo forest near Hangzhou, where he prepares himself for life through military self-discipline and art. Like Abela, Feng uses landscapes to amplify primal emotions, but this time mass movement and opulent colours are the substitutes for Shakespeare's poetry. This is a different kind of encounter between Elizabethan drama and what DVD stores call 'world cinema'. The Chinese film-makers have appreciated the

commercial potential of the Shakespearean material, and consciously used Western art to suggest psychological complexity. The film's black and crimson palace interiors, for example, borrow from Caravaggio and are intended to take us 'deep into the human mind.'

Despite their differences both *Makibefo* and *Ye Yan* show that the history of Shakespearean cinema has scarcely begun.

*Makibefo* is available on DVD from Scovillefilm and images may be seen on the website: [www.scovillefilm.com](http://www.scovillefilm.com). The DVD of *Ye Yan* is on general release.

Tony Howard is Professor of English at Warwick University. His exhibition *Paul Robeson: A Slave's Son* at Stratford will accompany the RSC's current *Othello* on a UK tour this spring.

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