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The Japanese Setting in the 2006 Film Adaptation of *As You Like It*: Kenneth Branagh's Japanese (G)Arden

Introduction

In this paper I propose to consider the 2006 film version of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*,¹ directed by Kenneth Branagh, with special emphasis on the significance of the film's Japanese setting. Branagh mixes elements of two entirely separate cultures, but for what reason? One of the main points of my research will be to try to come up with evidence that the Japanese setting adds meaningfully to the interpretation of the well-known play. An appreciation of the function of traditional Japanese motifs, the use of sets that depict particular periods of time and the choice of actors in the film are all aspects that should be considered in order to recognise how the Japanese setting throws new light on Shakespeare's comedy.

In my research I relied on several interviews with the director himself, in addition to some critical reviews that were published around the time of the film's release. I will also consider those scenes of the original play which seem to have special relevance in the adaptation. Presuming that the selection of some of the lines is in connection with Branagh's choice of setting, we will see how the Japanese setting gives new meaning to them.

Even though Branagh stated that the setting of the film is nineteenth-century Japan, it resembles more a stereotypical Asian country with mixed elements from several cultures rather than a specific place.² For some reason, the characters practice the Chinese art of *tai chi*,³ and we can recognise some more or less hidden Indian elements as well.⁴ But why does the setting matter at all? One could argue – as have those critics who wrote negative reviews of the film – that the whole point of Branagh's choice of setting is to prove that the Bard's tale could be placed anywhere, and it would not alter its meaning at all. After all, even the title of the play

¹ *As You Like It*. Dir. Kenneth BRANAGH. Perf. Bryce Dallas Howard, David Oyelowo, Kevin Kline, Alfred Molina and Romola Garai. The Shakespeare Film Company, 2006. Film.

² *Branagh Adapts And Directs Shakespeare's 'As You Like It' Debuting Aug. 21, On HBO*. 16 July, 2007. starpulse.com. 4 January 2015. Web. starpulse.com/news/index.php/2007/07/16/branagh_adapts_and_directs_shakespeare_s [1 June 2016].

³ 43:08–43:22 and 44:14–44:27 *AYLI* (Film). The indicated time references are valid for the 122:37 minute-long version which begins with the Medusa Motion Picture logo.

⁴ KLETT, Elizabeth. 'Dreaming of Orientalism in Kenneth Branagh's *As You Like It*.' *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* III.2 (2008). borrowers.uga.edu/781856/show Web [22 Nov. 2014].

carries this meaning. As far as I am concerned, this view rather simplifies Branagh's choice of environment, and I assume that setting the play in a Japanese environment makes more sense than we would think at first. Consequently, the critics who trashed the film did not look beyond the surface, and made rash decisions when depicting the film as one of the worst Shakespeare film adaptations.

*The Meiji era and crosstalk*⁵

At the beginning of the film, we receive some information about the environment and the time of the events. An important piece of information that stands out is that the era of the film is the time of the Meiji Restoration. This period in Japan's history is the time of modernisation, when, after hundreds of years of isolation, the country opened its doors to the outside world under the reign of Emperor Meiji. The court started copying Western attires, with average citizens soon doing the same. The most important goal of the Emperor (and of the whole era) was to avoid being colonised by Western empires. The best way to do this was to put the emphasis on developing an independent Japanese industry. The start of industrialism meant a complete change of life for almost every agricultural worker. This change of attitude at court and politics could not be felt immediately in the countryside, but it had a long-term effect on Japanese society, the impact of which can be seen even today.⁶

Re-setting Shakespeare's *As You Like It* in a time of confusion provides many insights we would not necessarily expect. The clash of opposite cultures is clearly outlined in the film with the use of different elements of both worlds. If Branagh's purpose was to show how different the people of these worlds – city and countryside – were, he succeeded splendidly. In Act 3 Scene 2 of the play, Touchstone talks to Corin about pastoral life:

CORIN And how like you this shepherd's life, Master Touchstone?

TOUCHSTONE Truly, shepherd, in respect of itself, it is a good life; but in respect that it is a shepherd's life, it is naught. In respect that it is solitary, I like it very well; but in respect that it is private, it is a very vile life. Now in respect it is in the fields, it pleaseth me well; but in respect it is not in the court, it is tedious. (...) ⁷

⁵ *Crosstalk*: when there is another, sometimes hidden meaning or connotation to a word or act other than it's original, similarly to intertextuality, but without the textual limitations.

⁶ For an in-depth discussion of the Meiji era, see BEASLEY, W. *The Meiji Restoration*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972. Print.

⁷ Hereafter I will use parentheses to indicate that some of the original lines are missing from the script.

Hast any philosophy in thee, shepherd?

CORIN No more but that I know the more one sickens the worse at ease he is; and that he that wants money, means and content is without three good friends; that the property of rain is to wet and fire to burn; that good pasture makes fat sheep; and that a great cause of the night is lack of the sun; (...)

TOUCHSTONE (...) a natural philosopher. Wast ever in court, shepherd?

CORIN No, truly.

TOUCHSTONE Then thou art damned.

CORIN Nay, I hope.

TOUCHSTONE Truly, thou art damned, like an ill-roasted egg, all on one side.

CORIN For not being at court? Your reason?

TOUCHSTONE Why, if thou never wast at court thou never sawst good manners; if thou never sawst good manners then thy manners must be wicked, and wickedness is sin and sin is damnation. Thou art in a parlous state, shepherd.

CORIN Not a whit, Touchstone. Those that are good manners at the court are as ridiculous in the country as the behaviour of the country is most mockable at the court. You told me you salute not at the court but you kiss your hands. That courtesy would be uncleanly if courtiers were shepherds.

TOUCHSTONE Instance, briefly. Come, instance.

CORIN Why, we are still handling our ewes, and their fells, you know, are greasy.

TOUCHSTONE Why, do not your courtier's hands sweat? (...)

CORIN Sir, I am a true labourer. I earn that I eat, get that I wear; owe no man hate, envy no man's happiness; glad of other men's good, content with my harm; and the greatest of my pride is to see my ewes graze and my lambs suck.

TOUCHSTONE That is another simple sin in you: to bring the ewes and the rams together and to offer to get your living by the copulation of cattle; (...) (AYLI 3.2.II-77)⁸

⁸ Hereafter I will quote the text of *As You Like It* from SHAKESPEARE, William. *The Arden Shakespeare – As You like It*. Ed. Juliet Dusinberre. London: Thomson Learning, 2006. Print.

Here we can see the characters as the embodiments of pre-modernisation and post-modernisation in Japan.⁹ Corin himself expresses that he does not understand the ways of the court, which here can mean the source of the modernisation policy. He even says that he finds the tradition of kissing hands – which people at court practise – a strange way of greeting. This statement in a Japanese environment tells us even more than it probably would in any other, since we can imagine how strange such a greeting must have been for a Japanese shepherd of the Meiji era (who was used to bowing as a sign of respectful greeting). He even goes on to describe the silliness of the custom, saying that a shepherd's hands would be too dirty and hard to practise hand-kissing. In a comical scene, Touchstone, here the embodiment of a courtier of the Meiji era, tries to convince Corin of the custom's usefulness, the existence of which is questionable at best. Touchstone claims that one does not know good manners until one has been to court. This statement is also ridiculed by the shepherd. Japan has been struggling with this clash of traditional Japanese and imported Western values ever since the country opened its harbours to the Western world, which makes it doubtful whether there would be many other historic places or times that would better serve the comical purpose of this conversation.

Oriental elements in Branagh's As You Like It

The multicultural aspects of the film should be considered in order to shed light on the reasons for re-setting the play to Japan. Although in Branagh's film we can find distinctly non-Japanese elements in some scenes (e.g. *tai chi*, Figure 5), the traditional Japanese motifs are dominant. The three quintessentially Japanese concepts are the *kabuki* theatre,¹⁰ the *sumō* fight¹¹ and the appearance of the *ninjas*.¹² Interestingly, all three of these can be seen at the beginning of the film. After the first scene, the only things that remind us that we are in Japan are a couple of well-placed objects (such as a samurai sword at Orlando's side), cuts to a *Shinto* gate,¹³ and some of the costumes.¹⁴



Figure 5: Touchstone doing tai chi

⁹ 58:20–59:00 *AYLI* (Film).

¹⁰ 02:20–03:25 *AYLI* (Film).

¹¹ 16:59–17:37 *AYLI* (Film).

¹² 03:30–3:48 *AYLI* (Film).

¹³ 43:38 *AYLI* (Film).

¹⁴ Silvius and Phoebe are in attires that somewhat resemble the clothing that peasants wore in nineteenth-century Japan.



Figure 1: Duke Senior in Western attire



Figure 2: Duke Frederick in Japanese style clothing

In a play that problematises identity through cross-dressing, the choice of the characters' costumes is especially relevant. This is also apparent in Branagh's presentation of the two Dukes (Figures 1 and 2). It is not a coincidence that Brian Blessed plays both Duke Senior and Duke Frederick, but in very different attires: whereas the old Duke insists on wearing the Western style of garments, the usurper Duke embraces Japanese culture and wears the traditional warrior clothing.¹⁵ We could of course interpret this difference in another way, by saying that Duke Frederick refuses what would have been viewed as the modern way of dressing in nineteenth-century Japan, when Western attire was the privilege of the elite. But whichever view we take, the two Dukes will complement and set off each other, like *yin* does *yang*. This, and the fact that we know that both Dukes are played by the same actor, suggest that they are not only opposites and each other's complements, but they are one and the same. This way Duke Frederick could be seen as the Old Duke's shadow-self,¹⁶ especially since Branagh added the scene of the usurpation, when they stare into each other's eyes, after which Duke Frederick emerges as the winner.¹⁷ The traditional Japanese costumes – other than



Figure 3: The two main actors wearing traditional Japanese attires at the wedding scene

¹⁵ KLETT (2008). According to the Arden edition, it was a usual practice in Elizabethan theatre to assign more than one role to actors, and in modern adaptations, it is common that the same actor plays both Dukes (DUSINBERRE 355–358).

¹⁶ In Jungian psychology shadow-doubles are the unconsciously restrained and rejected personalities, often the opposites of the conscious personalities (JUNG, C. G. 'Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious.' Ed. Sir Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, Gerhard Adler, William McGuire. *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung* (Volume 9, Part 1). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1959. Print).

¹⁷ 03:48–04:00 *AYLI* (Film).

in the case of the two Dukes – are not the attires of choice for the film, and they are only worn by the main actors at the wedding scene (Figure 3).

As for the objects seen in the film, there are many Japanese ones, especially at the beginning. Right in the first scene we see a kabuki performance with *koto* (a Japanese stringed instrument),¹⁸ and a strange mixture of samurai and *ninja* attack. What was confusing for the Japanese viewers themselves is that the *ninjas* are led by Duke Frederick, who is dressed in samurai warrior clothing.¹⁹ The aforementioned *ninjas* are also not in *seiza* when in front of the Duke,²⁰ but are lying face-down for some reason. The wrestling scene here is a *sumō* fight, but, strangely, the guardians, who before were *ninjas*, wear *kendō* outfits.²¹ In the wedding scene, one of the extras can be seen playing a guitar, which, of course, is not a native instrument of Japan. These inconsistencies mentioned above were the main reason why the film was not warmly welcomed in Japan.²² Branagh is also inconsistent in using the Japanese non-verbal traditions. There is a scene when William waves Audrey forward in the Western style,²³ the opposite of how Japanese people wave somebody forward, with their palms facing the ground. We will see later on that these little inconsistencies are not coincidental, and Branagh makes up for them by broadening the possible interpretations of the Japanese theme. Of course, there are Japanese style fans, parasols and *ukiyo-e* present in the film,²⁴ but their function might be to remind us that we are supposed to be in Japan, even when nothing else looks Japanese (Figure 4). It is interesting that these are the objects that are probably best-known to Europeans, since these were popular knick-knacks of the nineteenth-century Western aristocracy. An interesting solution for the letters Orlando writes to Rosalind is that these only contain Rosalind's name in Japanese in *shodō*,²⁵ just like her necklace does. This way Orlando expresses his love for Rosalind not only by writing poems, but by painting beautiful calligraphy of her name.²⁶



Figure 4: Rosalind and Celia holding Japanese style fans

¹⁸ A Japanese stringed instrument.

¹⁹ ケネス・ブラナー: お気に召すまま [Kenneth Branagh: *As You Like It* (Review)] Web. 5 January 2015 drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B--hUDHWp5XiZEXuckM2Y3VxLUE?usp=sharing [27 August 2017].

²⁰ The traditional way of sitting in Japan.

²¹ A Japanese martial art, 14:05 *AYLI* (Film).

²² ケネス・ブラナー: お気に召すまま [Kenneth Branagh: *As You Like It* (Review)].

²³ 31:52 *AYLI* (Film).

²⁴ Japanese woodblock paintings.

²⁵ Japanese calligraphy.

²⁶ 55:35 *AYLI* (Film).

As for the religious aspect of Japan, Branagh makes sure that both Shintō and Buddhist motifs are present in the film. These two religions live side-by-side in the film, just like in the lives of the Japanese. The entrance of Arden is guarded by a Japanese *torii*, a red Shintō gate, which already alludes to the idea that the forest of Arden is a magical place. In the garden, the refugees, Rosalind, Celia and Touchstone, meet a Buddhist monk who shows them the way.²⁷ He does this literally and figuratively as well, since Arden is the place where all three of them find love. At the end of the film, this monk is the one helping Duke Frederick, whose enlightenment, just like the Buddha's, is represented with him sitting under a tree. Buddhism is also present in the film through one of its schools, Zen Buddhism. Celia is with Rosalind in a *Zen karesansui*,²⁸ a Japanese rock garden. There is a *tōrō* here as well, which is a Japanese stone lantern, to be found in Buddhist temples or Shintō shrines. Another reference to Buddhism in the film is a crosstalk between the original Shakespearean text and the setting when Rosalind talks to Orlando about a past lover she drove to enter a monastery:

...that I drave my suitor from his mad humour of love to a living humour of madness, which was to forswear the full stream of the world and to live in a nook merely monastic. (*AYLI* 3.2.400–403)

Here the setting again provides extra meaning to the lines, since because of the Japanese context, we can immediately think of a Buddhist monk. By examining the most important Oriental elements in the film one by one, we see that all of these have their own functions, and were placed very carefully. Some of them only mean to signal the Oriental setting, but most allude to a deeper meaning.

Branagh's 'non-traditional' casting

After the multicultural aspects, let us consider the multiracial aspects of the film. Kenneth Branagh himself states in an interview that race was not an issue for him when casting for the roles of his films.²⁹ Accordingly, in *As You Like It*, two black actors play the quarrelling brothers (David Oyelowo stars as Orlando, and Adrian Lester plays Oliver). This is not the first time that Branagh has cast a black actor in a role that is traditionally played by white actors, since in the 1993 version of *Much Ado About Nothing* Denzel Washington plays Don Pedro, and in the 2000 adaptation of *Love's Labour Lost* Adrian Lester stars as Dumaine. In contrast, Lisa M. Anderson

²⁷ 32:31–32:54 *AYLI* (Film).

²⁸ This *karesansui* can also be seen in another scene, 41:55–43:06 *AYLI* (Film).

²⁹ tediousoldfools. 'Kenneth Branagh talks Hamlet ~ Casting.' Online Video Clip. *Dailymotion*. Dailymotion, 9 Aug. 2009. Web. dailymotion.com/video/x2wvxcf [6 June 2016].

in her essay 'When Race Matters' – contributed to the volume *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance* – argues that non-traditional casting is always an issue whatever a director may say. She contends that colour-blindness 'ultimately signifies assimilation' and that it 'requires that we ignore three hundred years of history' (91).³⁰ If we base our judgement on Anderson's argument, then what Branagh said about colour-blind casting is just an attempt to grab the audience's attention.

In this case the reason for Branagh's casting choice could be the assumption that by changing the scenery and the race of the actors, the film would appeal more to a modern audience. One might assume that non-traditional casting practices regarding Shakespearian dramas is an innovative way of modernising and shedding new light on a play, but so far this theory has not been proved. As Klett has pointed out, Branagh does attempt to create a multiracial environment in the film, but he does this unsuccessfully by 'marginalising and silencing most non-white characters'.³¹

For this paper, Branagh's idea of 'non-traditional' casting is especially significant because of the lack of Japanese actors in any of the main roles. The film has British and American actors in abundance, but the absence of Asian actors in important roles is remarkable. This is especially noticeable in the case of Audrey (played by a British actress), since her original suitor, William is played by an Asian actor. This is one of the few moments in the film when a slightly more prestigious role is given to an actor native to the setting. Yet another problem emerges because of the casting. Even the *Daily Mail's* critic, Christopher Tookey goes on to say that Branagh's unfortunate casting choice makes the scene where Audrey and Touchstone talk to William 'unpleasantly racist instead of funny'.³²

This is not the only incident where the race of the actors makes the lines sound different. Other notable roles in which Asian actors were cast are the couple Silvius and Phoebe, and Charles, the wrestler (Figure 6 and 7). The latter is silent throughout his scene, with all his lines spoken by a white actor. This situation seems especially controversial since it is indicated in the scene that *sumō*-wrestler Charles does actually understand English, since he nods in answer to Oliver's warnings.³³ Interestingly, in the original play, Charles has a significant role, since he is the first one to refer to Arden, and to note that the forest serves as home for the exiles (*AYLI* 1.1.96-111). The situation of the couple is slightly less problematic in this regard. It is true that at least their lines were not given away to a Caucasian actor, but, according to Elizabeth Klett, 'in this context, Rosalind's condemnation of Phoebe's appearance,

³⁰ Quoted in LITTLE, Arthur L. Rev. of *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance* Edited by Ayanna Thompson. *Shakespeare Studies* 37 (2009): 296–308. Print. 300.

³¹ KLETT (2008).

³² TOOKEY, Christopher. 'As YOU like it, Mr. Branagh, but certainly not me.' *Daily Mail*, 21 September 2007. Web. dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/reviews/article-483175/As-YOU-like-Mr-Branagh-certainly-me.html [1 January 2015].

³³ KLETT (2008).



Figure 6: Silviu and Phoebe

Figure 7: Charles, the Japanese wrestler

focusing on her “inky brows,” “black silk hair,” and “bugle eyeballs,” feels racist’,³⁴ These are also among the reasons why Buhler calls Branagh’s film ‘a muddled but fascinating attempt at a multiracial ... *As You Like It*’.³⁵ But the lack of attention to how a line can change in another context is not the only controversial aspect of the casting.

According to Mullini, Branagh’s failure to put at least one Japanese actor in the limelight diminishes the impact of the whole concept of the Japanese setting.³⁶ But this fact, and what Branagh calls ‘colour-blind’ casting, could actually be explained using the opening segment of the film. The clue is in the *haiku* of the opening scene, when the mood of the film is described as ‘A dream of Japan.’ If the whole story should indeed be interpreted as a dream, then anything could be possible, and following this idea, casting a black actor as Orlando and not casting Japanese actors in a Japanese environment makes sense. On the other hand, it might have only been the case that Branagh wanted to use Japan in order to put the story in an exotic setting, but by doing this he alienated the Japanese in the film. Given the fact that race is a very sensitive subject, should this have been an issue for Branagh when casting? Even though some critics do not agree with the choice of casting, it is a strong artistic statement that in no way should be disregarded when looking for answers to the reason for setting *As You Like It* in Japan. In the following section, I will attempt to consider the possible interpretations of the ‘dream of Japan’ theme, knowing that Branagh’s casting choices cannot be ignored when looking for possible interpretations.

³⁴ IBID (2008).

³⁵ BUHLER, Stephen M. ‘New Wave Shakespeare on Screen.’ *Shakespeare Quarterly* 59.2 (2008). 230–236. Print. 236.

³⁶ MULLINI, Roberta. ‘Kenneth Branagh’s *As You Like It*: Plural Conflicts on- and off-screen.’ *Studi Urbani, B - Scienze umane e sociali* 80 (2010): 263–276. Print. 266.

Possible interpretations of the 'Dream of Japan' theme

To understand the reasons for the Japanese setting, it is necessary to consider what the *haiku* in the opening segment might mean: 'A dream of Japan / Love and nature in disguise / All the world's a stage.' Depending on the meaning of (and on how we translate) this 'dream of Japan,' we might arrive at very different interpretations.³⁷ This *haiku* is probably the most important piece of information about the setting, and contains more in its three lines than the explanation given at the beginning of the film about the established mini-empires of Meiji-era Japan.³⁸ Conciseness is an important characteristic of *haikus*, and, as we will see, this poem broaches central questions about possible interpretations of the setting already in its first line.

The dream of the Japanese³⁹

One of the possible interpretations of the phrase 'dream of Japan' in the haiku would express the wishes of Japan. Although the setting is Japan, there are not too many Japanese characters other than some extras, and the aforementioned marginal characters. Even Branagh's choice not to put Japanese actors in the lime-light makes sense in this way. Ever since Japan opened up its gates to the Western World in 1867, copying and then improving the Western way has been a vogue. Even today, listening to Western music, wearing the clothes of Western brands and watching Western movies is the tendency in Japan, especially among the younger generations, among whom the knowledge of Western popular culture means being current and cool.⁴⁰ If we adopt this interpretation, the whole film is a manifestation of Japan's strange fascination with the Western world. In the film this Western craze reaches its climax in the dialogue of Phoebe and Rosalind in Act 3 Scene 4. Phoebe, played by a British actress of Asian descent, has an almost unexplainable attraction to Rosalind, played by an American actress. This kindling of emotions seems especially strange, since after the knowledge that Ganymede is just a disguise for a woman, Phoebe seems perfectly happy with marrying Silvius, played also by a British actor of Asian descent. Phoebe herself states in the text – and the choice of

³⁷ The official Hungarian translation of the poem is literal ('Japán álom / Szeretem és természet álruhában / Színház az egész világ'), but this translation does not keep to the formal requirements of the *haiku*. Instead of a literal translation, in this case, an artistic solution might be more appropriate. An attempt that would fulfil the formal and structural requirements would be for example the translation: 'A japán álom / két és kert álruhában / Színház a világ.' Of course, it is the English version that makes different interpretations possible, and the lack of knowledge of the original would limit our ability of interpretation. For this reason I will consider the original English haiku.

³⁸ 00:40 *AYLI* (Film).

³⁹ The Hungarian translation would be: Japán álma.

⁴⁰ DUIKER, William J. *Contemporary Word History*. 6th ed. Stamford: Cengage Learning, 2015. Print. 239.

actors and of scenery makes this an even more intriguing conversation – that even she herself does not know the cause of her fascination with him. As she says:

It is a pretty youth -- not very pretty --
 (...)

 There was a pretty redness in his lip,
 A little riper and more lusty red
 Than that mixed in his cheek. 'Twas just the difference
 Betwixt the constant red and mingled damask.
 (...)

 I have more cause to hate him than to love him,
 For what had he to do to chide at me?
 He said mine eyes were black and my hair black,
 And now I am remembered, scorned at me.
 I marvel why I answered not again. (...)

 (AYLI 3.5.114–133)⁴¹

The long description of appearance may strike us as only the thoughts of a woman describing her crush, but there is more to Branagh's adaptation than meets the (mind's) eye. The whole paragraph has an underlying meaning, especially if we bear in mind who play the characters under discussion. The description could very well fit the whole relationship of Japan with the Western world, and especially the United States. Phoebe says that she should hate him, but for some reason she cannot. If we think about the relationship of the two countries, from Captain Matthew C. Perry's arrival in 1853 to the dropping of the two atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we might question as well why the Japanese are so fascinated with the United States of America.⁴² If Branagh's intention with the Japanese setting and the choice of actors was to express this Western craze characterising the Japanese, which seems prevalent even in spite of the events of World War II, then the choice of actors here is very clever. Another factor supporting this interpretation is the already mentioned wedding scene where even the main characters wear traditional Japanese kimonos. It is usual for Japanese people to wear Western clothes for all their lives, but it is the tradition to attire themselves in kimono for their wedding ceremony. Here, the Western characters behave very much like the Japanese themselves.

⁴¹ 77:54–78:20 AYLI (Film)

⁴² LAEMMERHIRT, Iris-Aya. *Embracing Differences: Transnational Cultural Flows between Japan and the United States*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2013. Print. 96.

*The dream-like Japan*⁴³

If we take this interpretation, the meaning of the setting changes significantly. In many Western people's imagination Japan is an exotic place full of beautifully dressed locals. The film is set in the 19th century, the hey-day of Romanticism in Europe, when owning a small piece of the Orient, for example having a wallpaper of a Japanese mountain, meant being fashionable. By choosing this period for the play, Branagh consciously alludes to this aspect of the era, when not only the Japanese were obsessed with European culture, but Europeans were also obsessed with everything Oriental. Through the stereotypes and the many misunderstandings about some Japanese concepts in the setting, Branagh also shows us how the Western world regarded (and sometimes still regards) the Japan of the nineteenth century. The description at the beginning of the film about the era also alludes to the fact that Japan is often perceived to be a place possessing beauty and danger at the same time. This dichotomy is present throughout the film, if we just think about the *kabuki* scene suddenly interrupted by a *ninja* attack, or the lion attacking Oliver in the forest which at the same time provides peace for the brothers with its beauty and calm.

By adding the text at the beginning of the film about the dangers and beauties of Japan, it is very much possible that one artistic goal of the film was to show the attitude of the Westerners of the nineteenth century, and what perceptions they had of Japan. According to Edward Said, the idea of the Orient is a Western notion, which, we might add, seems to have largely disappeared by now. Said describes the Orient as 'a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.'⁴⁴ Branagh successfully conveys this aspect of the perception of the Far East with all the stereotypes present in the film. And what other frame would be better to portray this misunderstood impression the West has of Japan (and the Orient), than a play focusing on misapprehension, by a playwright whose works are regarded among the most valuable pieces of Western high culture? After all, Said describes the Orient as the biggest cultural rival of the West.⁴⁵ According to Rosen, Orientalism – regarding Japan – has not disappeared, but was transformed in the twentieth century. He says that whereas the West regarded Japan as a place of exotic beauty in the nineteenth century (and Branagh brings back this aspect of Japan in the film) the West's modern day perception of Japan has changed greatly because of the country's role in World War II.⁴⁶

After considering this aspect of the 'dream of Japan' theme, it is clear that this interpretation validates the many inconsistencies in the film regarding the use of Japanese elements. We may think of this adaptation as a representation of how

⁴³ The Hungarian translation would be: Egy álom Japánról.

⁴⁴ SAID, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1978. Print. 9.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ ROSEN, Steven L. 'Japan as Other: Orientalism and Cultural Conflict.' *Intercultural Communication* 4 (2000): n.pag. Web. immi.se/intercultural/nr4/rosen.html [6 January 2015].

the Western world sees the exotic land of Japan, so it is only natural that it should abound in mistakes and confusions.

*The ideal Japan*⁴⁷

The third possible interpretation is that Branagh shows us a yearned-after dreamland, an imaginary Japan, which the Western world thinks of as the perfect land. After the Meiji Restoration and the successful modernisation, Japan became one of the leading economies of the world. The exceptional industrial growth until the 1990s made the world regard the Japanese model as an economic miracle, and an example to follow. Of course, the film is set in nineteenth-century Japan, but since it was made in 2006, it is necessary to consider this aspect of the meaning of the 'dream of Japan' as well. However, when mentioning the Japanese economic miracle, sometimes people refer to an earlier period of time, which started around the time the film was set. As I mentioned earlier, the goal of the Meiji Restoration was to avoid the fate of the surrounding countries, to avoid becoming a colony in the short term, and to stop the colonial expansions of the Western world in the Pacific area in the long term. By borrowing the already successfully used Western inventions, the Japanese experienced amazing industrial growth. Japan was the prototype, the example of how to become a leading industry in less than a century. Of course, since we already know that this great advancement resulted in Japan's participation in World War II on the side of the Axis powers, this whole idea of an ideal prototypical country of development can be perceived to be ironic.

All of these three interpretations could be valid for the 'dream of Japan' theme, and, based on which one we choose, the meaning of the setting is bound to change significantly. We could even say that this seventeen-syllable *baiken* aptly sums up the artistic complexity of the setting: based on it, we have three valid interpretations for the Japanese theme.

The Japanese (G)Arden

Branagh seems to subscribe to the idea that we can interpret the Forest of Arden as a place of imagination. He is right in the sense that Shakespeare is not very specific about the location of the play,⁴⁸ we only know that there is a city and a forest, the former being the environment where the trauma happens (the usurpation), and the latter could be seen as the curing environment, where even Duke Frederick can find enlightenment. Naturally, placing the play in a Japanese environment is

⁴⁷ The Hungarian translation would be: A japán álom.

⁴⁸ DUSINBERRE (2006) 48.

apparently a far-fetched conclusion of this, but then again it will make us all the more intrigued.

Let me continue with an argument for what is probably the most problematic aspect of Branagh's choice of Japan as the setting for the play. Shakespeare's comedies often explore the tension between the city and nature, where escaping the bonds of civilised society provides love and solutions to the characters' problems. This tension between the city and nature is one of the elements in Shakespeare's reception which is really alien to mainstream traditions of Japanese culture. Though critics rarely suggest this is a reason for not being able to applaud the setting of the film, it is worth mentioning. Because of the setting, and because of how Japanese people traditionally relate to Nature,⁴⁹ Northrop Frye's theory of the Green World seems problematic for this adaptation.⁵⁰ Frye describes the forests of the Green World comedies as places where people escape from cities in order to get rid of the boundaries of civilisation.⁵¹ After the characters resolve their problems in the healing environment of the forest, they return to the city. The reason why this theory could be seen as problematic here is that this boundary that separates Nature and civilisation simply does not exist in some non-Western cultures, e.g. in Japan. The Japanese traditionally have a very close relationship to Nature that is significantly different from how Western culture relates to its environment. For the Japanese of the nineteenth century, a forest would not be a place to escape to, but something to be included in their everyday life. Of course, nowadays, because of the modernisation and acceptance of Western culture, this cultural gap between the West and Japan regarding the relationship of humans to nature seems to be disappearing.⁵²

But even this disharmony makes sense if we take the Orientalist interpretation of the 'dream of Japan' theme at face value. In this way, setting the play in an environment where one of the most important motifs makes little sense could be the right artistic choice in order to make us question our own judgement. We can treat this disharmony as one of the many deliberate mistakes Branagh commits, as a way of alluding to the Western people's perception of the Far East.

Conclusion

The *baiku* at the beginning of the film opens up the door to many possible interpretations that have not been considered before by the film's critics. The conscious choices of the Japanese elements contradict the generally negative critical opinion,

⁴⁹ HAYASHI, Aya. 'Finding the Voice of Japanese Wilderness.' *International Journal of Wilderness* 8.2 (2002): 34–37. Print. 34.

⁵⁰ FRYE, Northrop. 'The Mythos of Spring: Comedy.' In *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Ed. Robert D. Denham. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. Print. 170.

⁵¹ DENHAM (2006): 170.

⁵² HAYASHI (2002): 36.

and some of the important elements verifying the choice of the setting have hitherto remained unnoticed. As we have seen, whereas Western critics were anxious because of the whole idea of putting the famous Shakespearean play in a Japanese setting, Japanese critics were focusing on the inconsistencies Branagh commits throughout the film. Nonetheless, by examining the possible interpretation of the 'dream of Japan' theme and by getting to know the political and economic background of the era represented in the film, we can understand that placing the play in a Japanese setting is a valid and innovative artistic idea. Although Branagh's idea was certainly risky, and might not have achieved the desired effect, we cannot say that he had no reason to relocate the play to Japan. One could of course question how a film should be judged if the hidden motifs and elements are so easy to overlook, especially if they cover a wider range than that of the territory of an averagely educated viewer, or even a film critic. But in my opinion, such interpretative difficulties are far outweighed by the added interpretations the Japanese setting provides. In the end, whether Branagh meant to portray the impression the West has of Japan, the Japanese dream, or the dream of the Japanese themselves, the result is an outstanding Shakespeare adaptation, valuable both as a twenty-first-century recollection of Orientalism from the Western point of view, and as a criticism of modern Japanese society disguised in a Shakespearean comedy.

Abstract

The paper considers the Japanese setting of the 2006 film adaptation of Shakespeare's As You Like It. Kenneth Branagh's choice of Arden seems controversial and seemingly naive at first, but after a careful consideration it appears to be consistent and meaningful instead. The paper considers what additional values the Japanese setting provides, with the central arguments being based on the haiku which appears at the beginning of the film. The first line of the haiku provides three possible and very different meanings, all of which support Branagh's choice of background for the film. Another emerging question is whether crosstalk is possible between the original Shakespearean play and the Japanese setting, and what this adds to this adaptation.

Keywords

Shakespeare, As You Like It, adaptation, Japan, Japanese, Kenneth Branagh, movie

Absztrakt

A tanulmány Shakespeare Ahogy tetszik című művéből készült, 2006-os filmadaptáció japán helyszínét vizsgálja. Kenneth Branagh választása – hogy Arden Japánba helyezi – első pillantásra ellentmondásosnak tűnhet, azonban némi vizsgálódás után egyértelművé válik, hogy megfontolt döntésen alapul. A tanulmány elsősorban azt vizsgálja, hogy a japán helyszín

milyen hozzáadott értékek szolgálnak, illetve miért nagyon is releváns. Az érvelés alapját a film elején megjelenő haiku adja, melynek három rövid sorában három külön értelmezési mód lapul, s melyek mindegyike alátámasztja Branagh helyszínválasztását. Felmerül az a kérdés is, vajon lehetséges-e az áthallás az eredeti Shakespeare-darab és a japán környezet között, és hogy ez miben járul hozzá a vizsgált adaptáció értékéhez.

Kulcsszavak

Shakespeare, Ahogy tetszik, film, adaptáció, Japán, Kenneth Branagh