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Fresh Shakespeare from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival

Critics have argued against the festival's translation project, but it's part of the process of keeping Shakespeare alive

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By **DANIEL POLLACK-PELZNER**

When the Oregon Shakespeare Festival [announced](#) that it had commissioned 36 playwrights to translate all of Shakespeare's plays into contemporary English, my inbox flooded. As a Shakespeare professor, I was expected to defend the purity of his language. "Aren't you outraged?" one friend asked. Another demanded: "Isn't there a law against this?"

Here are my answers: there's no law, and I'm not outraged. On the contrary, I think OSF's project could be one of the most exciting things to happen to Shakespeare in years.



Hitomi Manaka as Lavinia in Yukio Ninagawa's 2006 Titus Andronicus (Taitasu Andoronikasu) at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre/"Lavinia – Ninagawa production" by Source (WP:NFCC#4). Licensed under Fair use via Wikipedia – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Lavinia_-_Ninagawa_production.jpg#/media/File:Lavinia_-_Ninagawa_production.jpg

Let me be clear: I love Shakespeare's language. I relish its muscularity, its tenderness, its soaring lyricism, its intricate wit, its arresting directness. Would I trade, say, Juliet's hurtling, longing line, "Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds, / Toward Phoebus' lodging," for the petulant No Fear Shakespeare translation: "I wish the sun would hurry up and set"? Never. There's no fear of a sun-god allusion, but no trembling anticipation, either. If my students showed up in class with No Fear Shakespeare, I'd send them packing on a slow boat to Stratford.

But I'm equally fascinated by the many ways that Shakespeare's language has been renewed for audiences around the world. The reason Shakespeare spread from a popular playwright on a small island

off the northern coast of Europe to the most produced and beloved writer on the great globe itself is that his works have been translated into nearly every modern language. The cultural reach of British imperialism accelerated the spread, but Shakespeare was embraced and adapted when the British were kicked out, and even non-English speaking countries delight in his works. New translations build new audiences.

In Germany, where “unser Shakespeare” (“our Shakespeare”) had become the most frequently staged playwright by the early twentieth century, a native writer hoped that if England lost the Great War, the peace treaty would stipulate “the formal surrender of William Shakespeare to Germany.” Many other cultures have also claimed Shakespeare as their own. Our modern understanding of Shylock as a sympathetic victim, rather than a comic villain, owes a great deal to his portrayal on the Yiddish stage. The first sound film version of “Hamlet” was made in Hindi and Urdu in 1935. In the early '90s, there were more Shakespeare productions in Tokyo than in London. And as Chancellor Gorkon claimed on “Star Trek”: “You have not experienced Shakespeare until you have read him in the original Klingon.”



Yiddish theater changed our view of Shylock.
“Shylock and Jessica,” Mauryc Gottlieb, oil on
canvas, 166.5 × 109.5 cm

Since I can’t read Klingon, I don’t know how “Phoebus’ lodging” would be rendered, but in most other languages, Shakespeare is translated into contemporary speech. That’s what OSF proposes to do for English, too. The new translations are not intended to replace Shakespeare’s original scripts. Instead, the translations will form companion pieces—gateway drugs to hook a new generation of audiences and readers.

When I was younger, I would read a prosaic plot summary before seeing Shakespeare so that I could follow the story. Wouldn't it be nice if kids had an option other than a plodding synopsis or No Fear Fakespeare to introduce them to the plays? OSF charges its playwrights to respect Shakespeare's rhyme, rhythm, and metaphor in their updates, which could create scripts that help novices savor his style, not only his (largely recycled) plots. Maybe your 10-year-old can read Shakespeare without help, but I couldn't, and I wish I'd had a savvy, stylish contemporary version to guide me.

Beyond what the commission will do for audiences, think of what it will do for the 36 playwrights and their consulting dramaturgs—more than half of whom will be women and writers of color. Is there a more ambitious, inclusive project to support the diversity of theater artists working today? [Writing in the New York Times](#), Columbia professor James Shapiro said he wished that OSF had hired playwrights to produce new shows like the Broadway smash "Hamilton" instead of updating Shakespeare. I'd love to see more hits like "Hamilton," but its creator, Lin-Manuel Miranda, didn't start his career with that show. Before "Hamilton," he was commissioned to translate Stephen Sondheim's lyrics to "West Side Story" into Spanish for a Broadway revival. (Sondheim, of course, had been hired in the 1950s to update "Romeo and Juliet.") When I assign my students to translate a scene from Shakespeare into contemporary English, it makes them read his language—each sound, each image, each reference, each word choice—far more closely than they had before.

The focus of Shakespeare's own humanist education at his Stratford grammar school was on translating Latin classics into the English of his day. Shakespeare went on to spend his career reworking earlier French and Italian and English sources into his plays. If we want to produce the next Miranda, or the next Shakespeare, it might help to put a generation of playwrights through their translation training regimen. Gallop apace!

*Daniel Pollack-Pelzner teaches Shakespeare, Renaissance drama and British literary history at Linfield College. His research focuses on Shakespeare adaptations—how writers have transformed Shakespeare's plots, characters and style into literary forms that speak to their own cultural moment. His most recent contribution to Oregon ArtsWatch was a [four-part look](#) at **The Taming of the Shrew** that closely examined productions at Oregon Shakespeare Festival and the Portland Shakespeare Project.*