

Education



Out of the Box

Tony Chan Fan-cheong is president of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He has spent his life pursuing his dreams relating to teaching and research, and has unique views on education, scientific and technological development, and nurturing the young.



LAST WEEK, I attended *Shake Shake Speare* at the Sunbeam Theatre in North Point, which was directed by my Queen's College classmate Yuen Lup-fun. Less than a year ago, I attended another play directed by him, *Rashomon*, based on the Japanese film classic by legendary director Akira Kurosawa.

My experience piqued my interest in attending the Shakespeare play. I have read some Shakespeare and am familiar with at least the titles and general story of many of his plays, though I have never been a good student of his opus. But this year being the 400th anniversary of the playwright's death, and headlined by famous lead players Stephen Chan and Cecilia Yip, I was intrigued.

It was a full house. Before the show, I was asked by Yuen to read out loud the Chinese version of the famous quote from *Hamlet* – "To be or not to be, that is the question" – and that our Financial Secretary John Tsang, would read the English version before

me. Tsang surprised everyone by paraphrasing the quote "To run or not to run, that's the real question" which received wide applause and laughter. What an apt and clever line to deliver at such an occasion!

Afterwards, I kicked myself for not being quick enough to seize the opportunity and retorted with "When will you run? That's the real question!" That would have made my night.

In his youth, Shakespeare was mocked by others because of his name, which meant "shaking the spear." But the name could also mean "shaking the theater" and "attack life with gusto."

The play was not a direct production of any particular Shakespearean play, but rather an imagined story of the playwright's youth, supposedly during the time when he was writing about *Romeo and Juliet*.

He had to struggle with the competitiveness of the theater circle in London, the loneliness of being separated from his wife and daughter left behind in his hometown, his delicate feelings toward a woman pretending to be a male actor vying for a role as Romeo, and suffering writer's block occasionally. The Shakespeare on stage was a mortal human, who had to deal with inner conflicts and struggle, rather than one of the mythical greatest writers of all time.

The play was complex and long, with the major actors/actresses playing multiple character roles. The music, originally composed by local composer Mui Kwong-chiu, all seemed very fitting to the period and the mood. The headlined players did fine acting and the supporting cast were great (I particularly like the

Shakespeare, 'glocalized'



actor who played Romeo). It must have not been easy to produce such a play – with many people behind the scenes, and many scene changes.

Sunbeam Theatre is one of the last remaining classic Hong Kong theaters. I used to know this neighborhood well as it is halfway between my college and my home in Shau Kei Wan. All others from that age have gone – save Sunbeam, thanks to the dedication of sponsor and donor Li Kui-ming, who is determined to keep this piece of history going even if it runs in red.

After watching the play, I could not help but feel that Shakespeare's observations on human nature still apply today. One of the last scenes, set in the war in



Sarajevo about two decades ago, was about a couple of young lovers trying to escape the city but were shot at the famous bridge. On the subtitle screen, it said the city was deeply divided by religious and political fractures, and that human spirit and the future of the city became collateral damage. I read it as a not-so-subtle reference to the current situation in Hong Kong.

The play is also a celebration of "localism," but of a different nature than that one reads in the news headlines these days. The play is mainly in Cantonese; it unapologetically produces a quintessential English play in the Hong Kong vernacular.

But at the same time, the play is also international. A significant fraction of the dialogue is in Putonghua, English and occasionally French, and the two choreographers are French and Vietnamese.

This new play is a classic example of "glocalization." We should encourage our young talents to go into performance arts, to pursue their passion and to enrich culture in Hong Kong.