

Estranged Elsewhere: Relocating Shakespearean Comedy in Taiwan—A Case Study of Tainaner Ensemble’s *Twelfth Night**

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Abstract

Of all the strategies to adapt William Shakespeare’s comedies, changing the setting is often the primary step for a local production. Relocating the original setting to the target culture would evoke a sense of familiarity within the audience. It will create a sense of identification and empathy among the target audience. A setting arrangement represents an organic world, presupposing the conflicts and cultural systems that characters may face. When the setting is relocated to a new time and space, every character in the drama world will undergo qualitative changes to varying degrees. It also changes the audience’s understanding and imagination of the original works. To illustrate this point, this study examines Tainaner Ensemble’s *Twelfth Night* (premiered in 2018). The background is adapted to Shanghai in the 1930s, a prosperous era of fine clothes and jazz music. Moving the scene to

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Shanghai seems to have shortened the distance between Shakespeare's drama and the Chinese-speaking audience by adding a touch of familiarity. However, for today's Taiwanese audience, Shanghai in the 1930s may just be a synonym for foreign memories or cultural images, symbolizing a virtual reality with a sense of distance. This combination gives the audience an ambiguous and mixed feeling, for the drama onstage is both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. This paper proposes the concept of the "Taiwanese Gaze" to analyze this spatial strategy. Instead of serving as a realistic, localized setting, Shanghai functions as an alienated, symbolic "elsewhere." By utilizing the hybridity of jazz music and the distance of a nostalgic city, the production articulates a "Taiwanese Gaze"—a specific mode of seeing that negotiates identity through estrangement rather than simple identification. This paper analyzes how this relocation transforms the stage into a living metaphor for identity in motion, preserving the logic of Shakespearean estrangement while reflecting Taiwan's own cultural ambiguity.

Keywords: *Twelfth Night*, Tainaner Ensemble, Taiwanese Gaze, intercultural adaptation, relocation

Introduction

The term “theatre” (*Juchang*/劇場) in Chinese has multiple meanings. It can refer to a “field,” “place,” or “location” for the audience to enjoy a performance, a “space” for presenting dramatic performances, and even a “carrier” of culture, art, or a collective identity of people. While theatre is organic, dynamic, and unstable, it simultaneously results from meticulous design and calculation. There are interactions between random and designed forms both inside and outside the theatre, making it possible for all participants (including the actors and audience altogether) to experience various and complex feelings at the same time within a shared space. Thus, when audience members enter the illusory space of the theatre, some may be deeply fascinated by everything on the stage, while others may be more distracted or disturbed by everything happening around the stage, including the seat arrangement or sounds (or even noise) coming from others. In this dynamic space where all focal points often compete against one another, the audience’s senses are constantly stimulated, and their active participation helps define their theatrical experience.

Since “theatre” represents more than “a visible space,” any scenographic alteration inevitably transforms the perceptual experience for all participants. Through physical space and stage design, the audience could be compelled to think or to feel. This is especially noteworthy in cross-cultural drama adaptations, where the transformation of time and space is significant. Therefore, how to transplant the background from a different culture into that of the target audience to evoke empathy is the central issue in the cross-cultural drama adaptation.

A common strategy in adapting and reinterpreting Shakespearean works involves relocating the background setting to make the adaptations more appealing to the local audience. For example, *Midsummer Night's Dream* (2013), presented by Our Theatre, is set in the rural town of Taiwan.¹ The play that features the religious

¹ *Midsummer Night's Dream* (《熱天酣眠》) by Our Theatre (阮劇團) was first produced in 2013, and since then there have been many reproductions, which is one of the most successful adaptations of Our Theatre. See “Our Theatre”: <https://ourtheatre.net/work/summertimedaze/> (2025/11/15).

festival and celebration in front of the temple just reminds the Taiwanese audience of their nostalgia for the life back in the 1950s-60s. In addition, there are also many Shakespearean adaptations in the form of Chinese traditional drama (*Xiqu*/戲曲), like Beijing opera (*Jingju*/京劇) and Taiwan Bangzi opera (*Yuju*/豫劇).² The background setting of Shakespearean adaptations is, by all means, transformed to a fictional location in ancient China, where the ethnic costumes and properties could fit the performing style. Once the background setting is transformed, many cultural and social elements are subsequently changed to justify the transformation. To the audience, the story plots might still be Shakespearean, but what they actually see could be a presentation of life in Taiwan or any other Chinese-speaking region, which draws them closer to the global canons by simultaneously exposing them to the familiar elements onstage.

This paper argues that the setting of Shanghai in Tainaner Ensemble's *Twelfth Night* (premiered in 2018)³ functions not as a realistic historical backdrop, but as an alienated, symbolic "elsewhere." The background of this play shifts from the early 17th-century Illyria to Shanghai in the 1930s, accompanied by jazz music to re/present that prosperous era. Such a change brings Shakespearean plays closer to the Chinese-speaking audience and adds a musical design to enrich the content. It is this juxtaposition of "foreign-ness" and familiarity onstage that inspires a further reflexive view within the audience. However, Shanghai in the 1930s, as for today's Taiwanese audience, may only be a synonym for a vague memory or cultural image, marking a virtual world with a sense of distance. By analyzing the spatial relocation, I am convinced that this choice preserves the logic of Shakespearean estrangement rather than resolving it through cultural familiarity. Furthermore, this production

² There are many well-known adaptations in Chinese traditional drama forms, such as *The Kingdom of Desire* (《慾望城國》) adapted from *Macbeth*, 1986), the first Taiwanese adaptation by Contemporary Legend Theatre (See: <http://www.twclt.com/Drama.aspx?CatID=348d4c35-4956-4158-8b4f-b99e3dbab83a>, 2025/11/15), or a series of Bangzi opera adaptations (豫莎劇) from Taiwan Bangzi Opera Company (臺灣豫劇團) (See: <https://www.ncfta.gov.tw/cp.aspx?n=2875>, 2025/11/15).

³ Tainaner Ensemble's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* premiered in 2018. Then the play was reproduced in 2019, 2020, 2022, and 2023. This has been one of the most popular musical productions of Tainaner Ensemble. See <https://www.tainanensemble.org/portfolio> (2025/07/23).

articulates specifically a “Taiwanese Gaze”—a key analytical lens I propose to define a distinctive mode of seeing that negotiates identity through hybridity, distance, and the interplay of the familiar and the foreign onstage. By seeing something that is both foreign and familiar to us, we then meditate on our own cultural memory and identity. Moreover, this “Taiwanese Gaze” offers a viewpoint that resonates locally by alienating or objectifying the foreign-ness. Unlike straightforward localization, the “Taiwanese Gaze” in this production utilizes the “non-local locality” of Shanghai to reflect on the ambiguous cultural position of the Taiwanese. This paper will first discuss the theoretical framework of theatre space, drawing on Scolnicov and Cresswell, and then analyze the production to illustrate how this spatial strategy turns the stage into a living metaphor for identity in motion.

I. The Significance of the Unseen Space Onstage

Before analyzing the specific spatial strategies, it is necessary to clarify the conceptual distinctions among “space,” “place,” and “setting” employed in this paper. According to Tim Cresswell, a “place” is viewed as a center of meanings constructed by experience and practice; it is never “finished” but is always being performed socially and culturally (64). In contrast, a “space” refers to a more abstract, metaphorical, or symbolic realm that holds the potential for movement and transformation. A “setting,” in a dramaturgical sense, designates the specific fictional or historical background chosen for the narrative—in this case, Shanghai in the 1930s. However, given the fluid nature of theatrical performance where the physical stage (space) transforms into a lived environment (place) through the actors’ bodies and the audience’s imagination, this paper deliberately allows these categories to overlap. This conceptual fluidity mirrors the production’s own strategy of blurring the lines between the real and the imagined.

In this context, “theatre” can refer to any physical and tangible architectural spaces, such as outdoor, indoor, open, or closed spaces, etc., and also imaginary spaces that present virtual reality, such as heaven, hell, specific cities, etc., forming an independent system unaffected by reality or natural laws. Performers shuttle

between these spaces, complying with reality while breaking free from its constraints, and presenting themselves while transforming into various roles. This is the charm of theatre itself: the audience can witness performers' or roles' crossing between reality and illusion, experiencing a dramatic world of free imagination. But what is the relationship between the "virtual" and "real" in the theatrical space? How does the "virtual" reality relate to the "real" reality?

First, the theatrical space is the expression or even a metaphor of the social position of people. Hanna Scolnicov gives an example of the usage of windows and balconies on the Renaissance stage, which is more than a stage facility but has symbolic meanings and functions (49-50). She points out that on the Renaissance stages, windows or balconies are common, although no one knows for sure the traceable historical starting point for this design. Yet, when it comes to the stage effects, especially in Shakespearean plays, window or balcony designs not only elevate the stage vertically and create stronger visual effects, but also increase flexibility in space configuration and stage application, which also adds a sense of mystery. A window or balcony, as an extension of the stage upward, refers to a private or personal space, and the view is usually blocked or not easily seen through from the audience's direction—especially from those at the lower central sections below the stage; therefore, the conversations or monologues taken place in these theatrical spaces are considered private or personal, since they are away from the public attention and characters could "safely" express what they have in mind without being "overheard." In other words, these spaces are utilized for concealing or revealing the truth, for what happens in these scenes might not be easily received or even tolerated by the general public.

Taking the social spatial restriction on women as an example, Scolnicov notices that on the Shakespearean stage, the scenes featuring the window or balcony often involve women. The most notable example would be found in Act II, Scene 2 from *Romeo and Juliet*, where Juliet expresses her thoughts by the window and is overheard by Romeo.

Juliet: O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?

Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

Romeo: [Aside] Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this? (2. 2. 36-40)

In this scene, Juliet is aware of the family feud between the Capulets and the Montagues, which would lead to the end of their young love, so she is secretly hoping for a turn or chance to change the distressing reality. What Juliet says to herself is her real thoughts in mind, only private to herself, which makes this theatrical space symbolic: a window or balcony is a place for secrets or truth.

Then, a similar example of the private scene can also be found in *Twelfth Night*. In the scene where Olivia expresses her true feelings to Viola (now as Cesario in disguise), Olivia leads Viola to her garden.

Olivia: *Let the garden door be shut*, and leave me to
my hearing.
Give me your hand, sir.

Viola: My duty, madam, and most humble service.

Olivia: What is your name?

Viola: Cesario is your servant's name, fair princess. (3. 1. 94-99, italics added)

The garden is now a symbol of Olivia's heart, where she is about to reveal her true feelings only to Viola. She says to Viola:

Give me leave, beseech you. I did send,
After the last enchantment you did here,
A ring in chase of you. So did I abuse
Myself, my servant, and, I fear me, you.
Under your hard construction must I sit,
To force that on you in a shameful cunning

Which you knew none of yours. What might you
think?

Have you not set mine honor at the stake
And baited it with all th' unmuzzled thoughts
That tyrannous heart can think? To one of your
receiving

Enough is shown. A cypress, not a bosom,
Hides my heart. So let me hear you speak. (3. 1. 115-128)

Unlike Juliet's monologue by the window, Olivia confesses her feelings directly to Viola, but she still does it in private. Just like the window or the balcony is blocked from the audience's view, the garden in this scene is now "shut" without anyone in sight. That is why Olivia could confidently reveal her true feelings and "command" Viola to speak her mind.

What is worth noting from the abovementioned examples is that, whether in the scenes set by the window, on the balcony, or in the garden, the private space is not only for secrets or truth revealing, but also symbolizes the confined space/social standing for women. The theatrical spaces designated for female characters only show that women could only speak their minds frankly in these confined and enclosed spaces. Just as what Scolnicov has put it, "The relationship between this architectural conception of scenery and the dramatic invention is intimately tied to the traditional association between woman and her house. The social position of women as well as the exigencies of the plot often relegate the heroines to the indoors, in circumstances not unlike *house-arrest*" (54, italics added). Linking women's images to the indoor or private spaces implies women's confined social status. On the Shakespearean stage, women are secured within the four walls of their houses, just like Juliet and Olivia.

More importantly, as shown in the abovementioned examples, although *Romeo and Juliet* and *Twelfth Night* belong to different genres, a fundamental spatial logic regarding gendered confinement that transcends generic boundaries equally exists. In Shakespearean plays, the architectural distinction between public and private

spaces consistently dictates where female characters can speak their truth, regardless of whether the play ends in a wedding or a funeral. The “window,” “balcony,” or “garden” functions as a structural female confinement and enclosure. Then, this methodological framework is crucial for understanding the comic adaptation in *Twelfth Night*, where spatial restriction is not removed but reconfigured. In *Twelfth Night*, Olivia occupies a similarly enclosed private space—the garden—which is a parallel mechanism for revealing the truth.

Therefore, Scolnicov, in her book, *Woman's Theatrical Space*, argues that analyzing how female images are presented onstage and the theatrical space could help us relate to women's status in society. “Seen from a feminist point of view, the articulation of the theatrical space is an expression of women's position in society” (Scolnicov 1). From Scolnicov's perspective, we can understand that the spatial configuration and design of the performing stage are closely related to the image and status presented by the roles, and inseparable from the time and space background of the drama. Moreover, the arrangement or design of the theatrical spaces not only expresses the consciousness of playwrights, directors, or actors but also how society's views and attitudes are towards different gender roles. This idea not only helps us understand drama through the architectural or physical performance venues, but further underscores the social significance behind these role-settings by how different roles (especially women) move and perform in socially regulated spaces.

II. The Alienated Exotic Cities as the Ideal Utopia

Similarly, we can further assert that the foreign city scenes or landscapes portrayed onstage are also how people perceive them socially and culturally. Just like a window, balcony, or garden onstage, the foreign scenes are deliberately presented to show something that cannot be seen easily—or even away from the public attention—to the regular Renaissance audience in Britain. Those exotic cities onstage, for instance, Verona in *Romeo and Juliet*, Venice in *The Merchant of Venice*, or Illyria in *Twelfth Night*, are distant to all the British audience. When playwrights depict these exotic sceneries and impose their imaginations onto their original

culture, they fulfill the audience's curiosity and will to pry into those foreign lands. Without offering a truthful account of these foreign cities, playwrights instead are giving the audience an illusory and alienating space to shape their ideal city: a non-existent utopia or even dystopia. These cities could be found on maps, but are artistically transformed, for some of their special qualities could be magnified or highlighted; for example, they could be more historical or culturally splendid, or with fewer socially regulated rules than London. To the Renaissance audience, they are both foreign yet somewhat familiar. As in *The Merchant of Venice*, the setting of Venice leaves us with the impression of a beautiful city in which the commercial activity is especially frequent and prominent, and where merchants from many trades converge. It is then reasonable to set the legal court for business disputes in this city, yet the social rules and laws are still similar to those of Britain. Thus, we might conclude that Shakespeare and his contemporaries utilize the geographic distinctions and stereotypical images to create a world that is real to them, but not what it really is.

If hidden places (like balconies) reveal personal truths, then foreign settings (like exotic cities) reveal social possibilities. By presenting a location removed from the audience's daily reality, the play explores actions and social fluidities that might be impossible in a local context. These exotic cities, just like the hidden windows or balconies onstage, are not central to the spotlight, and they are not always heard or seen in public, yet they pose some possibilities to the audience that there is always something beneath what we can witness on the surface. With this idea in mind, the logic of Tainaner Ensemble's adaptation becomes clear. Instead of choosing a familiar Taiwanese city to "localize" the play, the troupe selects Shanghai—a location that is geographically specific yet psychologically distant. Just as Shakespeare utilized the geographic distinctions of Illyria to create a world that is real to them, but not what it really is, Tainaner Ensemble employs Shanghai not as a historical document, but as a symbolic "elsewhere." This strategic choice mirrors the Shakespearean function of exoticism: constructing a "non-local locality" to serve as a utopian projection where social mobility and carnivalesque transformation are possible.

Moving the entire setting from Illyria to Shanghai by all means gives the play a new focal point and different outlook. Relocating a Shakespearean play to a Chinese environment and blending in with Taiwanese and Chinese elements helps the Taiwanese audience relate to the play better. The characters onstage speak Mandarin Chinese and Taiwanese, and sing the folk songs only known to Taiwanese people. Moreover, by applying the lively and impromptu style of jazz music, the theatre has become a carnivalesque festival. People could celebrate the beauty of love and enjoy the wonders of this virtual comic world both onstage and offstage. The vibe of Shanghai in the 1930s is rightfully fit for the theme of the play, for Shanghai, in people's imagination, is the city where the western and eastern cultures collide and the traditional and the modern merge.⁴ Furthermore, the jazz music here is a mediator of hybridity, making the stage a place where anything could be possible, and social mobility is fully flexible: a new social order has been established and can no longer be confined within the old feudal mindset. Yet, the function of jazz here extends beyond mere atmosphere-creating. By blending different cultural elements and breaking boundaries, jazz music acts as a sonic marker of non-belonging, a temporal device that collapses historical periods. By juxtaposing a 17th-century Shakespearean text with 1930s jazz and contemporary Taiwanese sensibilities,⁵ the production creates a form of “temporal estrangement” parallel to the spatial alienation of Shanghai.

⁴ In the program of Tainaner Ensemble's *Twelfth Night* (2020), the composer of the play, Blaire Ko (柯智豪) mentions that Shanghai in the early 20th century encountered the cultural collision from the East and West, so the music style at this time also displays a fusion of different music genres.

⁵ “Taiwanese sensibilities” (臺灣感性) originated from the impression of Korean tourists who travel in Taiwan. They often post nostalgic and retro photos on social media with a hashtag #대만감성, *Daeman gamseong* or “Taiwan sensibility.” See Lynn Su, “#Taiwan Sensibility: The Gritty, Retro Appeal to Taiwan's Walkups,” *Taiwan Panorama* (台灣光華雜誌), July 2025, https://www.taiwan-panorama.com/en-us/Articles/Details?Guid=ec6697ad-b926-48ea-b495-d73f0a04ffc2&CatId=10&postname=%23Taiwan%20Sensibility%3A-The%20Gritty%2C%20Retro%20Appeal%20of%20Taiwan%E2%80%99s%20Walkups&srltid=AfmBOoqWDX5aMwZeHAXIIVOSjsXqHiISJwYSYq2uPmRctc_obNIJWKon. (2026/01/28). In the eyes of these foreign tourists, the charm of Taiwan lies in the “imperfect” everyday aesthetic. People are friendly and warm, the cities are not fully urbanized and the pace is relaxing and slow, and more importantly, Taiwanese people still preserve cultural traditions. Tourists could find both the modern and the traditional on this small island. In other words, the beauty of Taiwan lies in its hybridity and the collage of various cultural elements.

Moreover, in order to highlight the vibe or the carnivalesque quality of Shanghai, Tainaner Ensemble's adaptation simplifies the cultural and historical depth of the city, consciously overlooking its complex socio-economic status in China, especially the colonizing forces, e.g., Japanese occupation, and class tensions at the time. For example, the class friction within the household presented by the conflict between Malvolio (Ma Wan-zhong/馬萬重 in Taiwanese production) and Olivia (Qin Dong-mei/秦冬梅 in Taiwanese production) just points out the masked social and economic disparity in this glamorous city. What Shanghai in the 1930s really looks like is never the primary concern of this adaptation. The carnivalesque vibe on the stage is only for creating a fun atmosphere without any cultural or historical indication or implication. As noted in Jen-hao Hsu's critique,⁶ such simplification risks erasing the brutal reality of Japanese occupation and class tensions inherent in the 1930s Shanghai. This deliberate erasure functions as a theatrical strategy to construct a perfect "elsewhere." Even the music design deviates from the real Shanghai and western jazz in the 1930s, but is more in line with contemporary popular music, to create a sense of estrangement. Just like all those exotic cities in Shakespearean plays, Shanghai in this context is but a flat image or icon to the audience. It symbolizes possibilities, turning points, or even a "Utopia" where dreams could come true, but not what it really is. The value of the exotic cities in Shakespearean plays lies in their "foreign-ness and other-ness": they are always outside of people's lives and the public attention, from which people could gain something they could not find in real life.

According to Kuang-sheng Shih, in his book *Intercultural Theatre: Diffusion*

⁶ According to Jen-hao Hsu, in the original text, apart from the comic elements, Shakespeare noticed the early emergence of capitalism, and the social order and the influence of the Christian Church were also challenged by this new ideology, which is often shown in his comedies. The gender disguise, social mobility and the pursuit of freedom are all keys to help us understand Shakespearean comic plays better. However, Tainaner Ensemble's version of *Twelfth Night* neither reflects the historical and social background in the original play nor explores further the background of the 1930s Shanghai. See Hsu, Jen-hao (許仁豪), "Jazz Musical: *Twelfth Night*" (爵士音樂劇《第十二夜》), ArtMap (藝術地圖), <https://www.artmap.com.hk/post/%E5%B0%88%E6%AC%84%E4%BD%9C%E5%AE%B6-%E8%A8%B1%E4%BB%81%E8%B1%AA-%E7%88%B5%E5%A3%AB%E9%9F%B3%E6%A8%82%E5%A8%87-%E7%AC%AC%E5%8D%81%E4%BA%8C%E5%A4%9C> (2026/01/24)

and Interpretation, there are four phases when it comes to the cultural diffusion and adapting foreign works (12-13). At first, people follow the stage directions of the foreign plays and present them as they really are. These foreign works are full of exotic attractions that cater to the audience's curiosity. Secondly, people start translating the foreign works, which would shorten the distance between the foreign works and the target audience and increase the works' popularity. Thirdly, playwrights further revise or adapt the translated works by applying the local cultural elements of the target audience to their productions. For example, characters would adopt the local names, local customs, and even the political and social systems. "The playwright replaces the people, time, and place of the translated version of plays with the people, places, customs and culture, politics, and socio-economic characteristics of his or her own country, so that it can be integrated into the theater culture of his or her own country that is familiar to the audience" (Shih 13, my translation). Then, finally, the local playwrights and artists would learn from or emulate these adaptations or foreign works to develop their own original production.⁷ They could further establish their own styles or techniques.

In accordance with Shih's definition, we could assume that Tainaner Ensemble's *Twelfth Night* belongs to the third-phase adaptation, aiming to familiarize the audience with the foreign play by adopting the local culture. When a foreign culture enters the target culture, playwrights of the target culture will translate it in their own way of viewing or understanding, blending elements of the local culture, so as to enhance the cultural and emotional proximity. However, most of the time, this technique to familiarize the audience remains at the level of formality, the exterior designs, such as names, locations, or local etiquette, without further reference to the cultural depth or concepts behind these designs. What's worth noting is that Shih's observations not only point out the process or

⁷ According to Shih, these four stages do not develop in a strictly linear or chronological order. Actually, because of the intense cultural exchanges and communication, we could find these four stages co-exist in our society (14). There could be some new foreign works (original culture) being introduced to a local culture (target culture) where translations or adaptations are already welcome and well-received. It's worth noting that the passage of cultural diffusion is never unidirectional; on the contrary, it is complicated and full of interactions.

development of intercultural theatre, but also the way cultures diffuse and merge. Before the source culture and the target culture fully merge with each other, there is always an “in-between” or “hybrid” phase where all cultural elements collide.

Shih’s theory resonates with Jen-hao Hsu’s critique that Tainaner Ensemble fails to “re-contextualize” Shanghai in its adaptation. In order to shorten the distance between Shakespearean works and the Taiwanese audience and enrich the level of entertainment, Tainaner Ensemble creates an “in-between” and hybridized space that belongs to neither the source culture nor the target culture. The troupe relocates the play to a city where it is distant from the local people’s life, and impresses the local audience with an image or a sense of foreign-ness and otherness, which makes this city background even more symbolic: this is a place on the map but not a city in the real sense.

III. Taiwanese Gaze: From Illyria to Shanghai

From the abovementioned discussion, we can conclude that a theatrical space is not merely a physical and tangible architecture, but a field filled with metaphorical and symbolic meanings. When presenting cross-cultural adaptations, many troupes, in order to attract the audience, will consider blending in the local cultures by changing the foreign names of the characters or the background setting. This is also one of the most common types of adaptations in Taiwan, which might produce cultural resonance within the audience and is also expected to shorten the distance between the Taiwanese audience and the canonical works. Yet, the choice of Shanghai as the setting, a distant city in China, does not really create a cultural proximity within the Taiwanese audience, but a strong sense of foreign-ness.

Illyria, in the original *Twelfth Night*, is geographically located on the western Balkan Peninsula, along the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea. To the British audience living in the 16-17th century England, this remote port city at the edge of Europe was far from ordinary. The journey to Illyria implied a high-risk endeavor heading for more adventures and mysteries, which often ended in shipwrecks and failures. However, if we look closely into *Twelfth Night*, we will find that the social

customs and culture in this faraway Illyria are similar to those in England. The geography has no impact on the characters; it's as if they are still living somewhere in England, maintaining their original lifestyles. Within this dramatic narrative, for example, Viola still feels the social restrictions on her gender, so she comes up with a plan to fight against the suppressing patriarchal society by faking her gender to protect herself and survive on her own, which mirrors the social reality of Shakespeare's time. Yet, when it comes to communication in a foreign land, Viola has no problem communicating with the Illyrians—without any language barriers and cultural shocks at all. Her journey to Illyria is more like a trip out of town, instead of crossing the oceans. In this sense, Illyria is not a foreign city full of exoticism or referring to a geographical specificity, but a symbol of “the elsewhere”: a place of estrangement and otherness. Watching this setting design, the British audience in the 16-17th century might not find it difficult to adjust to the “foreign city onstage” with something they were already familiar with. To the audience, although Viola is navigating a geographically remote and fictional world, the cultural codes and social realities she faces are intimately tied to the audience's own experiences.

The idea of traveling to “the elsewhere” with the touch of “otherness” enriches or even “romanticizes” the risk and danger of surviving in a foreign land alone. First, since there is no actual geographical specificity onstage, it implies that the characters are no longer under certain social or cultural restrictions; they could continue their lifestyle. Therefore, characters could start with a new identity or life in a whole new world right away. No formidable obstacles are preventing them from integrating into their target society. Second, living in a foreign world always implies challenges and danger, but not in this other world. Since characters, though living in a foreign land, could still solve problems by following the laws and rules they acquire from their home country, this other city is never foreign at all, but a mixed and hybrid place where the foreign and the local cultures co-exist.

This is the unique feature and dramatic strategy of Shakespearean plays: The geographical differences do not strongly affect the characters' actions, and the lifestyles of the characters even remain distinctly British. In Shakespearean plays,

apart from renowned international cities, there are more settings like deserted islands, forests, or fairylands, which lack identifiable geographical markers to reflect any specific society. This feature makes Shakespearean plays easily adaptable to other cultures. Playwrights do not need to extensively revise the text and the plot—just tweak it to suit the tastes of the target audience. Furthermore, any playwright who would like to adapt Shakespeare’s plays could create their own world and build a society based on their imagination.

Therefore, when Shakespeare’s setting of Illyria is switched and localized to Shanghai in a Taiwanese production, the change of setting connects and increases the cultural intimacy among the Taiwanese audience, especially for those who are less text-inclined. Moreover, despite the vivid urban vibe of Shanghai being presented onstage, the cultural signifiers—such as *Qipao* (a kind of Chinese ethnic dress), jazz music, or Taiwanese pop songs—from the target culture do not disrupt the action or digress from the original plot. The culturally specific gestures or signs do not further prevent the target audience from understanding the play, but add some humor or logic that are regionally familiar to everyone.

However, just like Illyria in the original text, the setting of 1930s Shanghai is also “romanticized” by overlooking its complex social and historical position in China. Shanghai here acts as a re-imagined place carrying a powerful sense of “otherness.” As the “Magic City”⁸ in the 1920s-1930s, Shanghai has been portrayed as a bustling port where the ancient and the modern co-exist, and where Eastern and Western cultures collide. It represents a liminal space where social order is

⁸ “The Magic City” or “魔都” (Mo-du) has been applied to refer to Shanghai, a city beyond people’s imagination. “魔” (Mo) in Chinese has double meanings: it could mean both “magic” or “demon,” positive and negative at the same time. This contrasting name somehow shows the nature of the city. This name reportedly came from a Japanese writer, Shofu Muramatsu (村松梢風, 1889-1961), who named Shanghai “the Magic City” for its intricate and exciting city life, rich with various cultures and lifestyles. In Muramatsu’s view, Shanghai is an incredible city full of Eastern charm and exoticism. Yet, there are also some dark sides of the city: high living expenses, bureaucracy, political corruption, and so on. It is a city where both the top class and the lowly class inhabit together, and a place where you could find the most dazzling and the most disgusting things standing next to each other. Until now, people still use the term “Mo-du” to refer to Shanghai. See Jiang Wen-jun (江文君) “The Origin of the Term ‘Mo-Du’ and its Knowledge System” (「魔都」一詞的由來及其知識譜系), 2023/12/22,

<https://www.chinawriter.com.cn/n1/2023/1222/c404063-40144987.html> (2026/01/24).

precarious and unstable. This resonates with Ying-hsien Lin's observation that the magic of Shanghai "lies in its liminal quality—between feudalism and capitalism, tradition and modernity, East and West."⁹ However, Tainaner Ensemble intentionally portrays the exciting urban life of Shanghai as what their opening theme song, "A Crazy World," displays:

This is a crazy world, a world only for thrills, only for debauchery,
A world of revelry and dazzling splendor.
In this crazy world, reason and emotions are intertwined,
No logic for love and hate,
Let us set aside morality, discard reason, but follow our heart,
Let us not waste this precious time, this precious time, this precious time.¹⁰

This theme song deliberately overlooks the social and historical complexity of this city, and demonstrates the world view of this theatrical space: this re-imagined Shanghai is merely a stage to celebrate love, and no rules or laws would prevent people from enjoying their lives and precious time.

As a city where all the rules bend, Shanghai becomes a modern Illyria not because of its geographical location or cultural proximity to the Taiwanese audience, but it amplifies the carnivalesque, dream-like, and disorienting nature of the original

⁹ My translation. The original text is as follows: "上海的魔力即在於它於封建與資本、傳統與現代、東方與西方間的邊界性。二十世紀初的上海在本劇演出之前，就已存在著一種可被辨識的世界觀架構，其地域性乘載於影視文本再製的符碼中。" See Lin, Ying-hsien (林映先), "'Shanghai' as a 'Stage Image'" (「上海」作為一種「舞台意象」:《第十二夜》), *Reviewing Performing Arts Taiwan* (表演藝術評論台), Online. 2020/03/24, <https://pareviews.ncafro.org.tw/?p=57930>. (2021/04/10).

¹⁰ My translation. This is the last part of the song, and the original text is as follows:

“這是個瘋狂的世界/只想刺激/只想放蕩/歌舞昇平/金碧輝煌
瘋狂世界裡/理性感性緊相依/愛恨完全沒有邏輯
讓我們放下倫理/把理智丟棄/跟隨自己的 kimochi
別辜負這美好光陰/美好光陰/美好光陰”

“A Crazy World” (瘋狂的世界) is the opening theme song and ending song of this musical production. The lyrics of the songs rightfully show Tainaner Ensemble's intention to turn the theatre into a fun and entertaining place where social rules and restrictions no longer dominate. People could find the complete lyrics on KKBOX, “A Crazy World” 2020/6/12, <https://www.kkbox.com/tw/tc/song/GpLRfosu-IKc0Fyzgb> (2026/01/28)

setting. Instead of functioning as a realistic backdrop, this re-imagined Shanghai thus becomes a mirror and a metaphor—by utilizing the elements that are familiar to the Taiwanese audience, to construct and display a “Taiwan Town” framed within the name of the fantasized Shanghai, creating a deliberate aesthetic distance. In this sense, Shanghai is viewed as “alienated” just like the hidden window or garden, preserving the Shakespearean estrangement rather than resolving it through total localization.

Moreover, Tainaner Ensemble localizes a play by relocating it to a “familiar yet foreign” setting, and this hybridity resonates with a postcolonial and queer reading of the play: just as the jazz fusion defies rigid musical boundaries, and Viola’s gender disguise challenges binary identities, allowing for a fluid “becoming” within this carnivalesque space, the stage becomes a place where different cultures meet and boundaries dissolve. Yet, in this adaptation, we don’t see much of the class conflicts and gender issues reflected in the original text. Shanghai could only be viewed as “alienated,” just like the hidden window, balcony, or garden onstage, for the purpose of pinpointing the world where the playwright wishes all the characters to dwell. Tainaner Ensemble’s Shanghai serves as a fashionable yet nostalgic icon for the audience to relate to and justifies the application of jazz music and dances, but never the real world.

Tainaner Ensemble exploits the idea of Shanghai as a cosmopolitan and global background without exploring deeper into the historical and social context of the city. By giving a “non-local locality” as the setting, Tainaner Ensemble’s strategy of localization seems to provoke more questions on cultural interpretation. While making the adaptation symbolically legible to the audience, the audience does not really view the characters as psychologically and socially grounded in local Taiwanese experiences. On the contrary, these cultural signs or symbols are simply theatrical objects and materials for us to access and then create a world where the Taiwanese audience could relate to. Though with tangible signs and symbols onstage, such as music or slang words, the play might as well evoke both fascination and the feeling of estrangement. These signs and symbols suspend the audience in a “time-out-of-time” that mirrors the “place-out-of-place” nature of this 1930s

Shanghai setting. Shanghai then could be viewed as “alienated” just like the hidden window onstage, leading us to experience beyond the physical theatrical space.

In fact, Tainaner Ensemble's choice is not just an adaptation strategy, but a manifestation of “Taiwanese Gaze”: to adapt the play (including “objectifying the cultural signs and symbols”) in the ways that resonate locally in Taiwanese sensibilities. “Taiwanese Gaze,” as defined earlier, here manifests as a distinctive mode of seeing and interpreting foreign cultural texts, grounded in Taiwan's complex historical and cultural position. I propose this concept not merely as a descriptive term for the audience's reception, but as a critical framework for analyzing the geopolitical unconscious of Taiwanese theatrical adaptations. Taiwanese people have experienced a cultural and linguistic plurality in life. When reinterpreting foreign texts or works, Taiwanese artists might be aware of the clash between Western and Eastern cultures. Moreover, due to Taiwan's political status, many artists may stand on the point where it is simultaneously peripheral and self-reflexive: we clearly sense the cultural authority from the West and Chinese cultural proximity; however, we belong to neither of them. This “Taiwanese Gaze” thus helps us view outward and inward at the same time: by seeing what we are NOT, we then meditate upon who we are. We view our “Self” through the distorted mirror of an “Other” that is neither fully Western nor Chinese. Furthermore, by presenting a theatrical world where the foreign and the familiar intersect, and allowing the Taiwanese audience to witness renowned classics filled with our own sense of cultural identity and creativity, the theatre is more than a site for entertainment or nostalgia, but a site to mediate Taiwanese people's cultural memory and imagination.

This framework differs significantly from broader theories of interculturalism, which often prioritize the “fusion” of cultures or the seamless “localization” of foreign texts into the target culture, as Shih has proposed in his four phases of diffusion and interpretation. Standard intercultural approaches might seek to erase the friction between the source text and the target context to create a unified aesthetic. In contrast, this “Taiwanese Gaze” embraces hybridity, ambiguity, and the deliberate maintenance of distance. It does not seek to resolve the tension between

the Shakespearean text and the Shanghai setting; instead, it utilizes the “non-local locality” of Shanghai to highlight Taiwan’s own ambiguous subject position. By looking at a “Shanghai” that is constructed as an “alienated elsewhere,” the Taiwanese audience is forced to confront their own cultural hybridity.

In *Twelfth Night*, Tainaner Ensemble has imposed the Taiwanese interpretation of the world onto an actual city via reimagination. Relocating the setting that is not rooted in Taiwan but geographically close to the Taiwanese audience—in short, by alienating a foreign city—shows that the troupe emphasizes the space of projection more than a place for identification. The troupe imposes a reimagined social structure and lifestyle onto a fictional Shanghai, underlining more how characters behave, speak, and relate to each other in a way that the Taiwanese audience understands intuitively. Risking over-familiarity or political specificity of a city, Tainaner Ensemble intends to blend all elements together and create a hybrid space that is known yet still foreign to the Taiwanese. The stage becomes a place where different cultures meet and exchange meanings through performance: it is a shared, hybrid space where the Taiwanese audience further perceives how different cultures function and interact. Jen-hao Hsu also argues that Tainaner Ensemble’s production reduces the 1930s Shanghai and jazz music to a series of nostalgic icons, without considering the historical and cultural depth behind these signs. This “hollowed-out” or “watered-down” history is precisely viewed through the lens of “Taiwanese Gaze.” This production does not aim for historical realism but constructs a symbolic space of projection of identity: a mixture of nostalgia, modernity, and the perpetual search for a place that feels like home but is always elsewhere.

It’s arguable that this “Taiwanese Gaze” could be metadramatic, which remains critical and reflective, but still prevents the audience from immersing in the setting. The troupe consciously manipulates cultural elements and signs, and fuses them all together. On the surface, it is a “Chinese” world where people speak Chinese and follow Chinese customs and social rules. Yet, to the Taiwanese audience, it is easy to identify what is Taiwanese and what is not. Then this remote and unfamiliar port city once again reminds the Taiwanese audience of their cultural identity. On this hybrid and reimagined space in the theatre, Taiwanese-specific gestures and symbols evoke

more cultural recognition among the audience and thus give them cultural anchors in this whimsical world. Theatre then serves as a reflection for Taiwanese to ponder upon the idea of being Taiwanese.

Patrice Pavis explains the goal of adaptors:

Most often, the adaptor is not someone specifically charged with transposing the contents and forms from one cultural shore to another. It is rather a group of enunciators intervening at all levels and at every stage of the production. They are subject to the institutional imperatives of the target culture, which tends to preserve from the foreign culture whatever suits its expectations, reinforces its convictions and renews it in adapting to the restraints of actual production. (16)

Adaptors do not just “collage” different cultures together and then throw the mixture on the stage. On the contrary, adaptors extract what is meaningful to them and their target culture, and generate new meanings for the audience. The stage becomes a space for dialogue. Moreover, it shows how artists perceive and understand cultures, and how they place Taiwan within the global culture.

Tim Cresswell, in outlining the genealogy of place studies, points out, “Places are constructed by those who act in them. In this sense, a place is never ‘finished,’ but is always being performed” (64, my translation). Cresswell sees “a place” as a space of “practice”—where people live, dwell, and experience. Thus, a place is always in flux, shaped and defined by the interactions, intentions, and relationships among people who occupy it. Cresswell’s idea is relevant for discussing the stage and setting when it comes to the intercultural theatre. When two seemingly disparate cultural backgrounds meet through the playwright, the audience, performers, and even the production teams, they create a “happening” reality—one that belongs to neither the original culture nor the target culture, but a performed and reimagined state. We see many symbol clusters onstage to create a staged truth, which is, in fact, a process of practice.

The intercultural theatre and adaptations, as a site for diverse cultural voices,

highlight the nature of the theatrical art: fluidity. Nothing in the theatre remains eternally fixed. While it may reflect a reality, it never reveals the whole. Space, places, and settings are a series of perspectives—ambiguous “twilight zones” that defy strict definitions, and it is also this very fluidity that creates a hybrid and liminal space for us to see who we really are and where new meanings emerge.

Conclusion

When I first saw Tainaner Ensemble’s *Twelfth Night*, I was amazed by the music and the stage design. The music was beautiful jazz but interspersed with Taiwanese elements, and the scenography was like a splendid Western nightclub and a grand garden, which could not be distinctly categorized as Western or Eastern. It was, in my opinion, a combination of many cultural signs, and yet it belonged to none of any particular culture. I had great fun, but could not see this adaptation as a move toward localization, which triggered me to study further why a change of setting could cause so much uneasiness within me.

The adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* by Tainaner Ensemble has explored how the relocation of setting—from the 16-17th century Illyria to the 1930s Shanghai—functions not only as a spatial reconfiguration but also as a cultural negotiation within the Taiwanese theatrical practice. The transformation of place is more than a matter of scenography; it is an ideological operation that foregrounds both the possibilities and the limitations of intercultural performance. The choice of Shanghai, a city simultaneously proximate and distant to the Taiwanese audience, reveals a double gesture of localization and estrangement. It gestures toward familiarity through languages, costumes, and musical design, yet retains a deliberate “otherness” that resists complete assimilation into the local. In doing so, the production articulates a “Taiwanese Gaze” that is both introspective and outward-looking—a lens that interprets, filters, and ultimately reimagines the Shakespearean narrative in a hybrid performative space. Seeing the familiar and foreign elements being presented onstage, the Taiwanese audience experiences a tension of the sense of belongingness: we are aware of who we are by being

surrounded by who we are not. The “otherness” mirrors our cultural identity.

The theatrical space is not a static backdrop but a dynamic field in which gender, identity, and cultural memory are rehearsed and renegotiated. The theatrical spaces—gardens, balconies, and even streets of an imagined Shanghai—have become vehicles for expressing both personal subjectivities and larger socio-cultural anxieties. Olivia's garden and Viola's disguised mobility, for instance, reiterate the dramaturgical motif of concealed truths and gendered constraints, while also resonating with the liminal space that Shanghai occupies in Taiwanese cultural imagination. Such spatial metaphors are not merely aesthetic choices; they are structurally embedded in the power dynamics of cross-cultural adaptation and theatrical representation. Furthermore, the “Shanghai” of this adaptation is neither historically precise nor ethnographically grounded: it is a symbolic construction, a metaphorical “elsewhere” that amplifies the fantastical qualities of Illyria, while simultaneously commenting on the fluid and often ambivalent relationship between Taiwan and its imagined cultural “others.”

In relocating Shakespeare's comedy to an imagined Shanghai, Tainaner Ensemble does not merely render the play more accessible to the local audience; it constructs a performative site where cultural identities, historical memories, and theatrical conventions intersect and collide. The stage, thus, becomes a threshold space—at once real and imagined, local and global—through which Taiwanese theatre continues to explore and articulate its evolving cultural position in a globalized world. Through such dramatic practice, the Taiwanese audience once again could reflect and reaffirm the vitality of local theatrical traditions and conventions, and interpret canonical works in our own way. Through the act of creative re-seeing, this adaptation not only revitalizes Shakespearean works for the local audience but also opens up more possibilities to imagine and interpret Western classics.

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臺灣莎喜劇改編中的場域挪移： 以台南人劇團的《第十二夜》為例

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摘 要

在莎喜劇的改編中，場域挪移常是首要的改變，是在地化改編的步驟之一，透過將原著場域移轉至標的觀眾（target audience）的文化中所產生的熟悉感，會使標的觀眾產生認同感與移情作用。一個場域的設定代表著一個有機的世界，預設著角色可能面對的衝突與體制，而當場域設定轉移之後，戲劇世界中的每個角色也會因此而產生不同程度的質變，扭轉了觀眾對原著角色的理解與想像。以台南人劇團的《第十二夜》（2018 首演）為例，其背景改編至 1930 年代的上海，伴著爵士樂重現衣香鬢影的繁華年代。將場景挪移至上海，看似拉近了莎劇與華語觀眾的距離，然而 1930 年代的上海對現今的臺灣觀眾來說，可能只是一個時代記憶或文化意象的代名詞，標誌著具有遙遠距離感的虛擬世界，而爵士音樂更非臺灣的本土樂種，這樣的結合給了觀眾既熟悉又陌生的曖昧感受。本文提出「臺灣凝視」（Taiwanese Gaze）之概念架構，論證此種場域挪移並非單純的在地化手段，而是將上海建構為一個象徵性疏離的「他方」（elsewhere）。透過分析劇中的空間策略，本文指出「臺灣凝視」（Taiwanese Gaze）是一種藉由文化混雜性（hybridity）與審美距離來定位自我身分主體性的視角；劇團透過此種策略性的「疏離」，將舞台轉化為流動的身分隱喻，在跨文化戲劇改編中展現出獨特的臺灣主體性。

關鍵詞：《第十二夜》、台南人劇團、臺灣凝視、跨文化改編、場域挪移

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