

**Research Tip:  
Paul Almonte, English**

In a famous essay entitled “Shakespeare in the Bush”, the anthropologist Laura Bohannon speaks of her experience sharing stories with the leaders of a tribe she was living with in Africa. Asked to tell a story that reflected universal feelings or values from *her* culture, she chose *Hamlet*, figuring that its central story of a young man needing to avenge his father’s death would be understood by everyone, that it would easily and clearly translate across cultures and time. “Human nature,” she said, “is pretty much the same the whole world over, at least the general plot and motivation of the greater tragedies would always be clear—everywhere.” To her surprise, the main premises of the story—that Claudius, the murderous, usurping uncle was evil, and that young Hamlet was fully justified in seeking revenge, among others—were not read or judged by the tribe members in the manner she expected (given that their sense of family dynamics and hierarchies were different in crucial ways, with lineage and responsibilities passing among brothers rather than from fathers to sons). As each “obvious” interpretation or morale of this supposedly universal tale was undermined or critiqued (for example, rather than criticizing her for her self-acknowledged “overhasty marriage,” the listeners applauded Queen Gertrude for so quickly and definitively aligning herself with her dead husband’s brother), Bohannon came to question her own project, her own ability to communicate across cultural divides. What do we miss, misunderstand, or lose when our so self-assured interpretations and premises are not as exact or absolute as we imagine, when our ears—as teachers and researchers—are not as finely tuned or unbiased as we thought?

Early this summer, and with Bohannon’s essay in mind, I began preparations to teach a course in Shakespeare at a small University in Klaipeda, Lithuania on the Baltic coast (having been asked to be a visiting professor there for the month of June). Consulting with the department chair, I asked some of the usual questions: what did the students—who were from Lithuania, Latvia, Russia, and the Ukraine—already know about Shakespeare, about “English” literature and culture in general, and what experiences (with language, with their own cultures and past) might I assume they’d bring to our discussions. Of course, I also made certain assumptions of my own as I developed the syllabus. Given the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of the country (caught between Germany and Russia during World War II and the Soviet occupation during and after the Stalinist regime), I figured that in addition to some of the quintessential Shakespearean themes (ambition, love, madness, and the nature of reality and the hereafter), the matters of kingship, divine right, and tyrannical rule in such plays as *Richard III* and *Henry V* would be most interesting to the students. To that end, I began researching how Shakespeare was read and performed in the country during this time. I found material describing how Soviet artists created Hamlet as a hero of the proletariat, who questioned the decadent bourgeois and fought for communism, and Lithuanian versions that used the play to contest the

communist message and subvert Soviet rule, casting Hamlet as a hero of freedom of personal and political thought.

Ready with the meanings I wanted to convey (that I assumed the students would want to hear), I began selecting versions of the plays to present (given the compacted summer term, the course was heavily film-based). I settled on some fairly straightforward, “representative” adaptations (Gibson’s *Hamlet*, for example) so we could focus on Shakespeare’s language and what he “meant” by it. The centerpiece of the course, though, would be Ian McKellan’s version of *Richard III*, which sets the plot of this plotting king in a fascist England of the 1930s and 40s, and which, if my assumptions were right, the students would embrace for its echoes of the impact of dictators like Hitler and Stalin. Almost as an afterthought, I included two other interpretations of Shakespeare: Ethan Hawke’s *Hamlet* and Akira Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood*, an adaptation of *Macbeth* which sets the play in a feudal Japan steeped in samurai culture. Well, you can probably guess where this is going. It wasn’t McKellan’s *Richard*—with its tanks and bombs, murderous, dictatorial politics and Nazi-like propagandist images that I figured so closely approximated the European/Baltic experience of war and tyranny—that most connected with the students. Instead, it was Kurosawa’s adaptation of *Macbeth*—which changes crucial aspects of Shakespeare’s play—that grabbed their attention. It was there, in a world of corruption where every samurai and ruler expected betrayal, where it was “Lady Macbeth” who understood the way of the world more clearly than her husband, that Shakespeare’s themes and our interest in interpreting what he meant, what Kurosawa meant, and what we saw and felt came out most fully. It was there, and not in the interpretations that I assumed the students would see themselves and their lives in, that they felt they most understood Shakespeare’s value as a means to cross time and space and communicate ideas, despite—or perhaps because of—vast cultural differences.

And so it was through this most roundabout of ways that our answers arrived so unexpectedly: with an American professor who spoke no Lithuanian or Russian and a diverse group of Baltic and eastern European students with terrific English skills, but little previous exposure to Shakespeare watching a Japanese version of a 16<sup>th</sup> century English play to figure out why Shakespeare was “important.” As teachers, we all ask questions of cross-cultural interpretation—of how (as scholars) and why (as professors) we select certain texts and ideas to present and values to promote—as we bring our scholarship and pedagogy into the classroom. This experience, though, certainly reminded me to be open to what the students saw and where they wanted to go. What they wanted to understand and emphasize certainly broadened the scope of what values and ideas I entertain both in terms of the general parameters of a course and the particular “answers” I seem to most readily accept or encourage. (Work cited: Laura Bohannon, “Shakespeare in the Bush”, *Natural History Magazine*, August/September, 1966.)