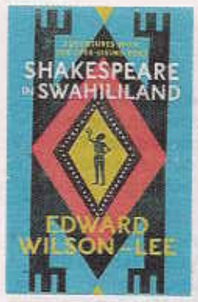

Lear and far: Wilson-Lee explores how East African artists have reworked Shakespeare (left). Luxor (right) was where his idea began

Africa's Bard and beautiful

Edward Wilson-Lee on the unlikely story of Shakespeare and his childhood home

AT the end of my first year studying English at university in 1999, I was desperate to leave London and I found in Egypt an adventure that was still manageable after the financial excesses of the fresher year. Tickets were going cheap: between the scalding August heat and the terror attack in Giza 18 months before, the major sites were empty and we had the run of many of them.

My travel partner and I economised by living the 'real' Egyptian life: foul madamas for breakfast and a diet of bread, pickles and lamb. We stayed in spare rooms and travelled by bus, train and on foot.


Kenya believe it: Edward Wilson-Lee

My strongest memory, however, was of a man who called to me from the shadows of a Luxor alley, quoting a line from Shakespeare's Macbeth: 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow.' We chatted for a few minutes and I moved on, unsure of what had just happened. This odd encounter returned to me every so often, especially when I started teaching Shakespeare for a living.

It was in search of more such unexpected, hybrid encounters that I set off years later back to the land of my childhood, East Africa, tracing the extraordinary story of Shakespeare's immense popularity in this region and its key part in its history.

His works were carried by Victorian expeditions and formed the backbone of an astonishing Indian theatre scene on the Kenya coast. They were printed by freed slaves, translated by politicians and used by anti-colonial fighters.

In Swahili there is an adjective – jua kali – which means 'hot sun' but also designates the informal economy of roadside traders who sell products, often handmade versions of things that usually come from factories.

Jua kali can be used as an insult – meaning something shoddily made – but it also reflects a can-do, make-do-and-mend attitude, and it is the jua kali Shakespeare from East Africa that excites me most: inventive, irreverent, irrepressible, like the Indian Twelfth Night that replaces shipwrecks with trainwrecks or the Masaai Othello, in which the Moor is mixed race and loathed because of his privilege.

I realised that in trying to 'live like a local' I was missing these literary hybrids, creating a pure 'foreign' culture that wasn't there. I have come to love those aspects of East African culture that recast something from elsewhere in my life, as the man in Luxor had changed Shakespeare – the trains by a Gikuyu village in the novels of Ngugi wa'Thiong'o, the bootleg cassettes that allowed writer Binyavanga Wainaina (and me) to idolise Michael Jackson from far-off Kenya, the movements between East Africa and the rest of the world in the books of MG Vassanji and Abdulrazak Gurnah.

Good travel, I suppose, changes the place you go home to.

Shakespeare In Swaziland (William Collins) is out now