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Theatre Reviews

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Theatre Reviews

***Please Continue (Hamlet)*. Dir. Yan Duyvendak and Roger Bernat. New Classics of Europe Festival. Stefan Jaracz Theatre, Łódź, Poland.**

Reviewed by *Agnieszka Rasmus**

Łódź boasts about an interesting international festival called “New Classics of Europe,” during which every year a number of inspiring, challenging and acclaimed productions from all over the world are invited to the Stefan Jaracz Theatre. In November 2014 I had a unique opportunity to witness and experience a totally new dimension of theatre as well as of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare’s most celebrated play.

Please, Continue (Hamlet) is not a straightforward production, where you wonder how “to be or not to be” is going to be delivered this time round and whether they are going to do it in modern dress or Renaissance costumes. It is the ultimate experiment in form (and, as it turned out, the ultimate test for the audience), where Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* meets a real-life inspired murder case, where actors interact with real judges, prosecutors and barristers, where reality meets fiction. In fact, the entire show is a murder case trial during which we become acquainted not only with the ins and outs of Hamlet’s predicament but also with the intricacies of the Polish judicial system. Before us stands a young Hamlet accused of killing Polonius, Ophelia as an auxiliary prosecutor, and Gertrude as a witness. Claudius is absent—he has fled to England. We all know how Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* ends. When illusion blends with reality, however, the outcome of the trial becomes totally unpredictable. Even the director does not know the verdict until the judge pronounces it towards the end.

To this effect, the auditorium and stage of the Stefan Jaracz Theatre were brightly lit throughout the entire show. The audience were handed little notebooks with a cut-out courthouse on the front cover, as if to indicate a thin line between theatrical illusion and a reality that we all had a chance to witness during the infamous O. J. Simpson trial broadcast live on television and the more recent Oscar Pistorius’s case. What blurred further the distinction was the presence of a real-life judge, Anna Maria Wesołowska, who happens to be a TV

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celebrity known for her starring role in a Polish TV court show. The members of the audience were also given the case files, which contained all sorts of documents, from written testimonies by witnesses, police reports and psychiatric evaluations to photographs of clothes, furniture, the murder weapon and the apartment where the murder occurred. Most importantly, they also served as the actors' material, on which they had constructed their characters, and the barrister's and prosecutor's material, on which they had built their case. All the clues played a crucial role in helping us discover what really happened on that fatal night.

The show was very long. In fact, there was no telling when it was going to end, as it was entirely improvised, with the three actors, two judges, one prosecutor, one barrister, and an expert witness called in to assess Hamlet's mental state, all interacting with each other according to the strict protocol of the Polish legal system. Not a single line was scripted. The actors were under extraordinary pressure, having to react on the spot. The lawyers did not have an easy time either. As theatre is run by a different set of rules, the audience was a bit unruly. In fact, many people left in the middle of the show, which was even more striking, considering that the lights were bright and there was no music to cover their angry footsteps.

What could have provoked such negative reactions? The case was inspired by a real murder that happened in a poor part of Marseille and bore a striking resemblance to *Hamlet*. When adapted to Łódź and Polish reality, it worked pretty convincingly. Unfortunately, it seems that, for some, relocating the Danish court to a rather forsaken urban district reeking of poverty and alcohol was not their idea of *Hamlet*, a play particularly beloved by the Polish audience. Gertrude, deprived of regal dignity, was a vulgar woman in her late forties, accidentally cracking jokes. Out of work all her life, she lived off Claudius's dole. Hamlet clearly suffered from lack of parental care and motivation. He exhibited antisocial behaviour as a result of some serious mental issues that had never been addressed. Ophelia, an unemployed hairdresser, appeared lost and unable to reconcile her naïve dreams with the harsh reality.

Could it be that the realism brought into the play was too much for some members of the audience to swallow? If so, then the production could be read as a powerful comment on class, so fascinating to observe in the country where for years under communism everybody was perforce "equal," and the only signifier of "class" or rather "intelligentsia" was related to higher education, of which *Hamlet* is a paramount symbol. It seems, then, that in contemporary Poland *Hamlet* stands not only for political resistance but also for education, refinement and taste, and that perhaps some members of the audience did not want to identify with the hero who, instead of philosophizing, struggled with answering the judge's questions and was shaking all over.

That is one possible reaction. The other one was revealed after the performance ended and we all heard that Hamlet was sentenced to 8 years in prison. This to some of us seemed a rather harsh verdict. As we were then told during a question-and-answer session with the cast and director Roger Bernat, *Please Continue (Hamlet)* had by then been performed around Europe 96 times, out of which 41 times Hamlet was acquitted and 51 times he was found guilty, with the sentence varying from 8 months to 11 years behind bars. In conversation with the judge, prosecutor and barrister another fascinating aspect of the production and the play came to light: It seemed that somehow we all projected our own idea of “Hamlet” on the young actor and wished he was let free. Was it because the realism of the show alerted us to the harsh circumstances in which he grew up and made us sympathize with the young man? Or was it because his name was “Hamlet” and we had all learned to like him anyway? As the prosecutor explained, the sentence was light and the judge lenient, considering that someone’s life had been taken away, and, as a result, someone else’s life—Ophelia’s—ruined. As we listened to their arguments, we realized that life and stage are perhaps not as similar as we had initially thought, after all...

For a thought-provoking evening, I therefore find *Please Continue (Hamlet)* “not guilty.”



Photographs by Greg Noo-Wak.

***Macbeth. The Bible of Darkness.* Dir. Theodoros Espiritou. Black Box, Michael Cacoyannis Foundation, Athens, Greece.**

Reviewed by *Xenia Georgopoulou**

In May 2015 Theodoros Espiritou presented at the Michael Cacoyannis Foundation his own version of *Macbeth*, an adaptation (based on his own translation of the Shakespearean text), which he also directed, bearing the subtitle *The Bible of Darkness*. The play got enthusiastic reviews, and more performances are being scheduled for 2016, to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death.

Espiritou's adaptation is divided into five parts following, more or less, Shakespeare's act division in his *Macbeth*. However, *The Bible of Darkness* is a play for two. The whole story is narrated or enacted by the Macbeths, from their own point of view. Throughout the play lines that do not belong to them in the Shakespearean original are paraphrased (mostly using indirect speech) in order to fit a narration of the events that were originally meant to be performed onstage, and both characters often address invisible interlocutors. The spectacularity of scenes such as those featuring the weird sisters or Banquo's ghost is absent from this play. Instead, we are faced with a very personal and internalized version of the story.

At the beginning of the play Macbeth and his Lady are covered with a white veil that apparently separates them from the rest of the world. They seem to live in a world of their own, a universe that rotates around their desires, obsessions and nightmares. As Espiritou himself explains, "they live and breathe without the frame of place and time," located "in some kind of Purgatory, where they incessantly repeat—as another Sisyphean torture—the murder they once committed" («Η εξουσία θέτει τους κανόνες του παιχνιδιού»); "their frozen palace is transformed into a mental landscape of painful awareness and unspeakable horror."¹

Espiritou connects the couple's deeds with their personal life: For the Macbeths the acquisition of the throne could be seen as a means to fill the gap of the absent child («Η εξουσία θέτει τους κανόνες του παιχνιδιού»). The value of a child as successor and heir and the price of a child's loss are stressed in Espiritou's text, where a couple of interesting changes have been made regarding the characters' offspring. In Shakespeare's play (1:7:54), Lady Macbeth mentions that she has "given suck" (which means that she has given birth), but it is not specified what has become of her child—or her children,—whom we consider dead. In Espiritou's version Lady Macbeth has given birth to a stillborn

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¹ From the press release of the play.

child. Apart from this alteration, there is another one regarding Macduff's children. In *The Bible of Darkness* there is only one (a son), whereas Shakespeare uses plural for Macduff's offspring on several occasions.² However, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* only one of Macduff's children (a son) appears onstage, which could have led to the idea of Macduff's only son.

In Espiritou's play of obsession and loss, Macbeth and his Lady are somehow seen as one person, which alludes to Freud's essay "Some Character-types Met with in Psycho-analytic Work" (1916), where he applies to *Macbeth* an idea he found in an unpublished study by Ludwig Jekels, who "believes that Shakespeare often splits a character up into two personages, which, taken separately, are not completely understandable and do not become so until they are brought together once more into a unity" (323). This is exactly the impression given in this production, where the Macbeths are seen as "twin embodiments of Evil."³

This idea of the two characters seen as one is also detected in the way the director splits the parts between the two roles. It all starts with Macbeth's letter, half read by his Lady and half uttered by himself. Lady Macbeth also shares her husband's original part on other occasions, such as the lines addressed to Banquo before the banquet.

Espiritou keeps the idea of the couple as one person until the end of his play, where Lady Macbeth's last lines of madness alternate with her husband's lines on the way to his fall. Unlike Shakespeare's play, where Lady Macbeth's death is reported, in *The Bible of Darkness* she dies in Macbeth's hands, depicting even better the collapse of the inseparable couple, with Lady Macbeth's death followed by Macbeth's fall.

Espiritou confines his characters to a secluded space that could be the couple's bedroom. In a way, the play becomes a domestic tragedy. The only piece of set (designed by Assi Dimitrolopoulou) is a construction that is mostly used as a bed, but also as a table. In the banquet scene the bed becomes the table around which the Macbeths entertain their invisible guests, lit in a bright light, only to get back to its original role as a bed, lit in the dim blue light of the couple's common psyche, omnipresent in the rest of the play.

The two characters' twinned existence is underscored by their choreographed movements (designed by Pauline Huguet), as well as their costumes (designed by Assi Dimitrolopoulou). The lower part of Macbeth's body (from the waist down) is clad in a long, dark skirt, alluding to the majesty of his kingship as well as his dark deeds, whereas the upper part is naked, as if to indicate that this seemingly powerful king is actually too exposed to his enemies, who multiply as the play proceeds. Similarly, Lady Macbeth wears a long dark skirt and a white strapless bodice, her bosom eventually exposed, to reveal her own vulnerability.

² See the multiple references to Macduff's children in 4:3.

³ See note 1.

Mary Kassioumi's make up design, consisting of the couple's white-painted faces (the white paint extending to their torso and hands) with dark circles around the eyes, seems to denote not only the colour of fear, which makes their blood drain from their faces, but also their gradual movement towards death. To the same effect, Lambros Pigounis's music and sound effects, including whispers and voices that create a menacing atmosphere, underline the terror—first underlying, then too obvious—that envelops Macbeth and his Lady.

Ideally cast by the director, Nikos Pantelidis as Macbeth and Despina Sarafeidou as Lady Macbeth perfectly encapsulate in their acting the characters' dark passion for power and the growing terror on the way to their fall. Onstage the two talented actors become “these two pieces of one and only person, one and only creature” described by Pantelidis («Το θέατρο θέλει αγάπη, αλλά και προβολή»), but also, in Sarafeidou's words, “the monsters that potentially exist inside each one of us” («Οι Μακμπέθ είναι τα τέρατα που εν δυνάμει υπάρχουν μέσα στον καθένα μας»).

Based on an almost non-existent budget, Theodoros Espiritou and his team managed to create a breathtaking *Macbeth* of their own. In a period of severe financial crisis in Greece, Theodoros Espiritou promises himself that, “in and out of the theatre, [he] will keep dreaming of a better world” («Πιστεύω στη φιλοδοξία με μέτρο»).

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