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Theatre Reviews

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Theatre Reviews

***Romeo and Juliet for Two*. Dir. Kostas Gakis, Athina Moustaka, Konstantinos Bibis. 104 Theatre, Athens, Greece.**

Reviewed by *Xenia Georgopoulou**

A Breathtaking Romeo and Juliet for Two

In December 2012 *Romeo and Juliet for Two* was first presented for three nights during the 3rd Low Budget Festival, held at the Michael Cacoyannis Foundation in Athens. For those who didn't have the chance to watch it on that occasion, the production reopened in November 2013 on the central stage of 104, in the centre of Athens.¹

Romeo and Juliet for Two stemmed from Kostas Gakis's idea of Romeo and Juliet as two ghosts who appear to us today to tell their story. The final outcome, however, was a work for three: both the final script (which partly summarizes Shakespeare's text and partly sticks to it using selected passages from Dionysis Kapsalis's translation) and the staging were arranged by Gakis himself, as well as Athina Moustaka and Konstantinos Bibis, who also took on the parts of Juliet and Romeo, respectively.

The show was characterized by its creators as "an acting puzzle for two actors who undertake to face the famous Shakespearean text playing all of the play's parts in a crazy game of cross-dressing and transformations".² This "crazy game" took place on a bare black stage, which, along with the two actors' plain black outfit, constituted the canvas for their "transformations", made possible by Elli Lidorikioti's props. Within seconds, Moustaka interchanged the parts of Mercutio and Benvolio by changing hats, and elsewhere Bibis played almost simultaneously the Nurse and Romeo. This frantic alternation of roles was also

* University of Athens, Greece.

¹ The play also opened in Cyprus in October 2013, in a production of THOC, staged by the same team. In the summer of 2014 the Greek production was invited to participate in the international Shakespeare festival in Serbia, organized by Nikita Milivojević.

² See the team's comments on their production under the title "Romeo and Juliet – like two shooting stars" on protagon.gr (16 December 2013): http://www.protagon.gr/?i=protagon.el.article&id=30065#item_comments.

commented onstage, when Bibis asked for a therapist among the audience, apparently lost in his Nurse-and-Romeo interchange. Moustaka even played three parts at a time (Juliet, Friar Lawrence and Paris), using makeup (her face painted in two halves corresponding to the first two roles), her bare hands (to form Paris's glasses) and a video camera operated by Bibis, which projected the actress's face (partial or whole) on a screen at the back of the stage. The scene where Juliet's body is discovered in her bedroom was presented as a puppet show, with Bibis playing all the roles of the scene from behind Moustaka's standing body, using their respective props. Roles also changed hands, as in the case of Tybalt, played by both actors in the same scene.

These frenetic changes of roles were enabled not only by hats, masks or puppets, but also by the minimal but ingenious pieces of set designed by Lidorikioti. In a white piece of cloth five square holes represented the windows of Capulet's house, which allowed the two actors to play various parts, ranging from the cooks to the masters of the house. Lidorikioti provided shrewd scenic solutions throughout the show. A large tube of white cloth represented Juliet's bed on the two lovers' wedding night, which enabled the two actors to reenact the consummation scene standing on their feet. The windows overlooking the theatre's yard were also used. When the windows were closed, the backlit cartons that covered them, cut in a way that brought to mind shadow theatre house figures, depicted the city of Verona; when the windows were opened, they revealed a tree growing in the theatre's yard, which represented exiled Romeo's whereabouts in Mantua. In the overall dark set of the production, the lights, designed by Sakis Birbilis, underlined throughout the show the two lovers' bright figures within the dark context of their families' strife, but also stressed the excitement or agony of every particular scene.

The alternating comic and tragic moments of the play (at the basis of the whole concept, as the three creators underline³) were underscored by music (most of it original, composed by Kostas Gakis, Kostas Lolos and Akis Filios), which was almost omnipresent. Most of it (with the exception of a few playback pieces) was performed onstage by Akis Filios, and included an electric piano, a guitar, a cello, a harmonica, a kazoo, and various pieces of percussion. The composers of the show's music were inspired by a variety of musical genres, ranging from Renaissance and classical music at large (reserved mostly for the romantic or dramatic scenes) to jazz and blues, hip hop (surprisingly performed by the Nurse, too), but also Greek folk music (a well known traditional marriage song was used in the scene of the two lovers' wedding, and the audience was encouraged to sing along with the actors).⁴ The importance of the role played by music in the production was also evident in the fact that the potions used by both

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ The songs' lyrics were found in the production's programme, which also included a cd with the show's music.

Juliet and Romeo (provided by Friar Lawrence and the Apothecary, respectively) were represented by the sound of a small music box that was given to them in place of a vial. Music, on the whole, was used all over the show to indicate the passage from one situation to another, and became clearly more melancholic after Mercutio's death, which constitutes, according to the three directors, the major twist in the play's mood.⁵

The creators of the show included various sporadic references to the play's era, as well as the original text and the Shakespearean canon at large. In the beginning of the show the two actors introduced themselves wearing Renaissance ruffles, although the rest of their attire rather referred to our own era –if any era at all. As for Shakespeare's original, the team alluded to their own research regarding the Bard's text in a special reference to the meaning of the phrase "You kiss by the book", stopping the show's flow for a while to provide several existing Greek translations of the excerpt. Elsewhere, the prince's famous "To be or not to be" line from *Hamlet* was heard in a *bras de fer* between Mercutio and Tybalt.

Despite the tribute paid to the playwright's era, the production was mostly about his play's universality. The team used various references to our time to underline the timeless nature of Shakespeare's play, as in the scene where Capulet arranges Juliet's wedding day with Paris keeping in mind the Champions League games of the week. As for the chess metaphor in the beginning of the show (when the servants of the households of Capulet and Montague were represented by the black and white horses of a game of chess, Tybalt and Benvolio by the towers, whereas Capulet and Montague by the two king pawns), it seemed to illustrate, through the diachronic popularity of the game, that everything in life is all about strife and politics.

The fact that the whole production was performed by two people had its own symbolism; according to the creators of the show,

[i]n a period of crisis it is important to return to the original matter, the noble simplicity but also the sufficiency that the number two provides to the human relationships, so that we recall but also remind the audience of the power of coexistence and solidarity. Besides, the moral of the play, that the power of love can even stop a civil strife, is extremely topical for us, in a period when strife seems to lurk, raising shadows and nightmares of older eras.⁶

In this period of crisis, Gakis, Moustaka and Bibis used not only the play's meaning but also the means they used to create their production to make their point. Watching *Romeo and Juliet for Two* the audience was also reminded that it only takes a bare stage, a few props, and some good ideas to create theatrical magic.

⁵ See note 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*

***Lady Macbeth*. Dir. Marios Mettis. Teatro Thentro, Nicosia, Cyprus.**

Reviewed by *Eleni Pilla**

Following L. C. Knight's "How Many Children Hath Lady Macbeth," Shakespeare's depiction of children, motherhood and maternal violence in *Macbeth* has received academic scrutiny. In his radical reworking of the original in Greek, Marios Mettis very successfully scripted a one-hour drama of fear arising from the irrevocable loss of a babe. Staged in Cyprus with a cast consisting of the couple (Niovi Charalambous and Giorgos Anagiotos) and a "Gower" figure called Compere (Christodoulos Martas), Mettis boldly brings Lady Macbeth to the centre. Niovi Charalambous is no novice when it comes to Shakespeare. She also played the role of Desdemona in the 2010 *Othellos* by the Cyprus Theatre Organization. This adaptation is of interest due to its representation of character and the play-within-the-play.

In Mettis's adaptation of Shakespeare's famous tragedy the emotion of fear predominates, overwhelming the characters and their ensuing actions. Affirming the production's preoccupation with fear, Lady Macbeth exclaims: "Everything stems out of fear, nothing from love." Lady Macbeth has lost a babe before the play begins and, as the narrator informs us, she is growing old in the Castle. The director draws attention to time and its effects on Lady Macbeth in the programme of the production:

Lady Macbeth spends most of her time alone in a castle while her husband is constantly away in endless battles. She fears that at one point he will not return alive. She grows older, and gradually loses her charm and beauty. The sheer thought that she will grow old alone scares her. A child may help the situation; it would be a consolation, a form of company. Even this possibility appears to fade with the passage of time; as her female nature dictates, soon she will not be in a position to reproduce. (no pag.)

This obvious concern with time coincides with the Shakespearean play's fascination with time. As A. R. Braunmuller (23) remarks, "*Macbeth* is deeply interested in the nature of time."

This is a sexy Lady Macbeth. Her long curly hair and the greenish dress she dons evoke her passionate nature. It is a shame that her feminine presence is not appreciated. The Compere, who functions as an internal voice, asks "Where is Lady Macbeth in this story?" Since she cannot embrace maternity, she aspires for sovereignty in order to forge an identity. Because a male character voices her ambitions, the adaptation indicates that she takes on masculine characteristics.

* Independent scholar.

She is not gratifying her need for self-advancement, but affirming herself as she does not have a child.

The absent mother motif is prevalent in Shakespearean drama. The absent child motif prevails in this Cypriot adaptation of *Macbeth*. The Shakespearean play's references to babies, according to Cleanth Brooks (39), constitute "the most powerful symbol in the tragedy." The absence and loss of a babe in *Lady Macbeth* is unremittingly negative, and all efforts to substitute that loss prove futile, leading the couple to their demise. Unlike the Shakespearean play, this adaptation does not open with a thunderstorm evoking the power of nature, but depicts Lady Macbeth giving birth, thus connoting human, feminine power. Macbeth simultaneously has the same experience downstage, exposing the distance between the couple. This directorial decision attributes not only feminine qualities to Macbeth but also instills a fear of female generative power. The adaptation's preoccupation with the denial of motherhood is reiterated after Lady Macbeth commits suicide. Macbeth clutches her and looks up towards a higher power asking for Lady Macbeth to be healed. She has to be pitied since she has no children. His own male insecurities come to the surface as he wishes that he had been her son rather than her husband because she did not need a husband. Mettis alters Macduff's line "He has no children" (4:3:218) in the Shakespearean play to "She has no children" and assigns it to Macbeth. Macbeth provides an excuse for the actions of Lady Macbeth: she is childless. What binds the couple is not bloodlust and ambition, but the lack of a child. Like Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, this *Macbeth* acknowledges that his is a "fruitless crown, / [. . .] a barren sceptre" (3.1.62-63).

At the end of *Lady Macbeth* the isolation of the couple is crystallized as the audience witnesses Lady Macbeth alone attempting to grab her child, which is represented by a dummy. The dummy visually represents a "naked newborn babe" (1:7:21), who pities his mother. Now she is downstage and reaches her hands while the Compere holds the babe. The babe initially asks for a hug but when he naively asks his mother about what's on her hands, she tries to wash off the blood. She rushes upstairs to her child, but then moves away and says in utter desperation that her hand has a foul smell. The Shakespearean Lady Macbeth, as Joseph Rosenblum (1252) indicates, is "a rationalist and a literalist, perhaps by nature, perhaps by suppressing her imagination. She sees no mind forged dagger, no ghost. The owl and cricket speak no words to her ear." This Lady Macbeth cannot suppress her imagination; she sees and hears her babe before her. However, her foul deeds impede her from having an intimate relationship with her child. Departing from Shakespeare's play, this Lady Macbeth is incapable of maternal violence. It is impossible for the audience to detest her. She is not as strong and fiendlike as her Shakespearean counterpart. The infant's innocence prompts her to probe into her soul. The adaptation makes it very plausible that she was "full o' th' milk of human kindness" (1:5:15) but lost it when she was

bereft of a child. Therefore, this adaptation destabilizes the Shakespearean play's depiction of maternal agency. As Stephanie Chamberlain (79) remarks, "Perhaps no other Shakespearean character better represents the threat of maternal agency than does Lady Macbeth, one whose studied cruelty nurtures social and political chaos."

This is also the case with Macbeth. Savagery cannot be associated with his character, although he is guilty of regicide. The audience does not get the impression of him as "a butcher" (5.9.36), because the murder of Macduff's family is rendered into comic relief and presented by the Compere in a play-within-the-play. The play-within-the-play is about "Macbeth and Blood" and functions as a satire of the character and actions of Macbeth, while also revealing the characteristics of his victims. Christodoulos Martas (Compere) brings the element of satire into the play-within-the-play and the play at large, because he also stars in a TV series which satirizes contemporary Cypriot social and political reality. In the play-within-the-play Macbeth's malice is exaggerated because he murders randomly. Hilariously, the murders take place on the kitchen table and Macbeth's victims are represented by peppers. In "Macbeth and Blood" Macbeth becomes the dangerous dagger which spills blood, yet he is not Machiavellian. Ludicrously, Banquo (a pepper) is worried that Macbeth does not like the cake he has made for him, and when he asks for red wine, Macbeth stabs him. Lady Macduff is ironically unaware of Macbeth's nature and meets her fate when she naively declares that life is fantastic. The other two peppers (her sons) are also knifed, one in the lungs and the other in the heart. Macbeth is very decisive when it comes to which organ to attack. None is exempt from Macbeth's murderous urge. When hilariously informed that the pepper under the table is the tall, ugly passerby, Macbeth compulsively puts an end to his life too. Murder can create a nasty salad in Mettis's world. A more sinister visual association of Macbeth with the dagger is endorsed when the shadow of the knife appears on the curtains and on the back of his white shirt while he speaks about fear. This visual imprint registers the disintegration of his character and strengthens his verbal affirmation: "his murder killed my soul."

Apart from the two main characters, the director creates a strong structural device, the Compere, a "Gower" figure, who very efficiently ties the action together. The Compere has multiple functions. He reads the letter from Macbeth, eavesdrops on the characters, voices their thoughts, prompts them to realizations, stages the play-within-the-play, impersonates other characters with the use of masks, and entertains the audience. The Compere establishes a strange intimacy with the audience while he invades the privacy and domesticity of the couple. When the couple is upstairs in the bedroom talking about the healing of wounds, he sits near them on the rails, with crossed hands and then flicking his hair. On many instances he touches the characters and, although invisible to

them, he omnisciently informs them about their emotions. He tells Macbeth mockingly: “you’ve shit yourself.”

At the start of the play, the Compere’s role is almost invasive, because he inserts himself under the pregnant Lady Macbeth’s dress forming part of her stomach, and pops out when she delivers. The agency of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is diminished when they commit suicide, because the Compere hands them individually the knife with which to end their lives. Eavesdroppers are usually punished in Shakespeare. Polonius is killed and Othello murders his wife and then commits suicide. This eavesdropper is triumphant at the end of the play. At the beginning of the play and when both characters have committed suicide, he renders all the action into spectacle by exclaiming “Ladies and Gentlemen, this is a fantastic night for murder.” In contrast to the original, where time is marked by fertility and renewal in Malcolm’s speech “What’s more to do, / Which would be planted newly with the time, [...] / We will perform in measure, time, and place” (5:9:31-40), the 2013 adaptation of the play closes with a vivid promise of barrenness and murder.

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PRODUCTION IMAGES



From left to right: The creators of *Romeo and Juliet for Two*, Konstantinos Bibis, Athina Moustaka, Kostas Gakis. Photograph by Christos Chatzichristos



From left to right: Athina Moustaka (Juliet), Konstantinos Bibis (Romeo). Photograph by Eftichia Vlachou

Hamlet*. Dir. Jan Klata. Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre, Gdańsk, Poland.**Reviewed by *Urszula Kizelbach**Was lesen Sie, mein Prinz? ... Bücher, Bücher, Bücher!***

Jan Klata's *Hamlet* evolved since 2004; from an idealistic, rebellious and slightly naive H. played by the Polish actor Marcin Czarnik he turned into a modern-day celeb with a flair for dramatic art, impersonated by Dmitrij Schaad. Klata collaborated with a group of German actors from Schauspielhaus Bochum, and so the play was largely performed in German. "I think *Hamlet* is a Pole", said Klata about Czarnik's H. (Wąsiewicz 10). Indeed, *H.* was staged in a symbolic non-theatrical venue, in a derelict Gdańsk shipyard, which served as the birthplace of the first non-communist trade union in 1980 called "The Solidarity". The play *H.* was in fact a commentary on post-Solidarity Poland, a country which after the year 2000 stands at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, with the shipyard facing bankruptcy due to ill management, with the "children" of the Solidarity movement now quarrelling and fighting with one another as members of opposite fractions in the right-wing party, with common people indulging in shopping sprees and consumer lifestyle during the rise of a so long awaited capitalism. The shipyard, however, was not the only remnant of the forgotten Polish tradition. As the play commenced, *Hamlet's* Father's Ghost entered the shipyard hall on horseback, representing a winged Hussar (a soldier of light cavalry in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the sixteenth century). Which son would not take heed of the words "Remember me" spoken by such a father?

There was no soldier in the opening scene of Klata's 2013 *Hamlet*; the twenty-first century is not an age of national heroes. But Marcin Czarnik was there as an echo of the former play, playing Old *Hamlet* and Fortinbras. He entered the stage in a fencing costume, since all characters in *H.* wore white fencing uniforms as signs of their royal status. Old *Hamlet* began with performing modern choreographed dance to the music, a cover version of *Sweet Dreams* by Eurhythmics. His message was very short: "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (*Hamlet*, 1:5:25). What was embodied by the winged Hussar in Klata's *H.* was in this play rendered by the initial "shower" of books, as, literally, books fell from the sky, and all characters walked on books, wallowed in books, books formed a landfill on the stage, even Ophelia's grave was made of books, whereas Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seemed to have

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attended a fast-reading course, since they read books very quickly. Soon after the books fell down, Old Hamlet, standing on a raised platform, uttered the words from Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine*: "I was Hamlet. I stood on the coast and spoke with the surf BLABLA at my back the ruins of Europe". The stage was dark, it was only equipped with a mirror installation and bars, resembling a ballet room.

Modern Elsinore was marked by globalisation: Hamlet, Claudius and Gertrude posed as contemporary celebrities, smiling and waving at some imaginary audience. Klata created a distance between the theatre audience and another type of audience in the performance; we could not see them, but we could hear them, their loud applause playing from loudspeakers. Hamlet experienced frequent headaches; he clearly was not fond of this empty ritual which he unwillingly became a part of. His attire, too, stood out from other characters' costumes. The representatives of the court wore black vestments, a sort of modern eccentric haute couture, which was inspired by Elizabethan dress, as, for example, the ruffles around Gertrude's and Claudius's necks (Kwaśniewska 3-5). Hamlet, on the other hand, wore a hoodie, black combat trousers and army boots. In contrast, the court in *H.* was represented by white fencing gear, and all characters wore fencing costumes, which were soon stained by the red wine that was served at a table in the initial scene. Grzegorz Gzyl's Claudius in 2004 was not a celeb, but his courtliness was manifested by his impeccable table manners and extensive wine tasting expertise.

One of the scenes that made the biggest impression in Klata's 2013 *Hamlet* was the Mousetrap, which was not about Claudius—it was not even about Hamlet (though directed by him)—but rather about modern theatre. The Mousetrap was divided in two parts. In part one Hamlet recited the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, looking like a schoolboy, waving and smiling at his parents who sat among the (actual) audience in the middle gallery (Kwaśniewska 4). Andreas Grothgar's Claudius was very satisfied with this performance; he acted in a condescending manner, behaving like Simon Cowell in *The X Factor*, and gave Hamlet advice about his acting and oration (he spoke fluent English, with a slight German accent). The second part of the performance was overwhelming and unfocussed. To the accompaniment of very loud techno music, Hamlet, Rosencrantz (Roland Riebeling) and Guildenstern (Nicola Mastroberardino) were splashing coloured paint and clay all around the plastic wrap covered stage. Initially, all three actors wore pigs' masks and imitated sexual and physiological activities—for example, they urinated and defecated. And although these gestures were pretended and the stage was not really stained (thanks to the plastic wrap), Claudius was clearly enraged, because the show violated his sense of good taste. He screamed and dashed for the exit. Gertrude, played by an energetic and sexy Bettina Engelhardt, loved this show, which she suggested by giving it the thumbs up, doubling up with laughter.

Klata's *Mousetrap* was a commentary on modern theatrical and staging traditions; it tested the limits of theatrical illusion and put to the test modern ways of staging Shakespeare. Klata asked a few fundamental questions: What is theatrical art? How should Hamlet be shown on stage? That is, how do we stage the "To be or not to be" soliloquy in the first place? Should it be shown in the manner of classical theatre or as a wordless and mindless performance, with the characters splashing one another with coloured paints? We might then be supporters of Claudius, who approves of tradition and the conventional narrative-based theatre, or we might like to choose to laugh together with Gertrude, who, in her mini dress and black leather high heels, prefers the extremes, because they are more fun. Hamlet's second show was an act of rebellion in the style of Viennese actionists: it caused a major scandal by imitating the ugliest human drives. Hamlet's performance of the *Mousetrap* followed contemporary trends in the staging of Shakespeare's tragedies in contemporary German theatre¹, which involve a lot of nudity, brutality, verging on the extremes, as, for example, Jürgen Gosch's 2005 staging of *Macbeth* in Düsseldorf. The actual audience had the feeling that Hamlet's *Mousetrap* was his artistic manifesto and prognosticated a kind of revolution; yet, Hamlet seemed unsure what it was that he rebelled against and how to rebel against it.

The final fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes in Klata's 2013 performance was a moving scene, involving no rapiers and swords but modern artistic choreography and martial arts. Klata cut most of the original play-text, and the scene was filled up with modern music and choreography. Hamlet and Laertes faced each other, stood close to the mirror wall and entered a fierce competition for the best contemporary dancer. They stretched and contorted their bodies, flailed their arms and kicked their legs, but suddenly the music died down and we could hear loud sounds imitating the pounding of the heart. This battle ended in a symbolic plucking of the opponent's heart. First, Laertes plucked Hamlet's heart and displayed it to the audience, holding it in his fist; next, Hamlet did the same. It is interesting to note that Gertrude died soon after Hamlet's heart had been removed from his chest; it was the first instance of her maternal affection and emotional bonding with Hamlet during the play, as normally she used to be seen beside Claudius, enjoying her celebrity life and running onto the stage like a teenager. When Hamlet was lying dead, Czarnik's Fortinbras entered the stage, put Hamlet's body in an upright position, lighted two cigarettes and put one in Hamlet's mouth. Next, Fortinbras sat close to Hamlet and started to recite (in Polish) *Elegy of Fortinbras* by the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert.

Herbert's elegy begins exactly where Shakespeare's tragedy ends—it describes the arrival of Fortinbras as a new Prince of Denmark. Czarnik's

¹ I am grateful to Jacek Fabiszak for this and other stimulating ideas.

Fortinbras was a very pragmatic politician; although he thought little of Hamlet's military skills, he asserted: "You will have a soldier's funeral without having been a soldier". He would be an unhesitating and, maybe, tyrannical ruler: "one has to take the city by the neck and shake it a bit". Finally, he said that there will be no tragedy after Hamlet's death, because he would be busy running "a sewer project", writing "a decree on prostitutes and beggars" and "elaborating a better system of prisons". The Ghost was non-existent in the final scene of the play; it was Fortinbras who occupied the floor and set out some plans for the future. Klata's *H.*, in contrast, ended on a different note: after the fencing duel between Hamlet and Laertes, Old Hamlet returned on horseback, dressed as a Hussar. He was the last voice in the play, not Fortinbras, when he rode triumphantly before the audience in the post-industrial space of the shipyard, and his final appearance was preceded by an actor's words: "And where is all this?"

"Revolution without revolution. Love without love. Death without death. In Jan Klata's theatre it's the lack of presence that counts and not what's there on stage", says Anna Burzyńska (381) in her review of Klata's work. In *Hamlet* (2013) we never got to see Ophelia's drowning, but the most observant members of the audience were able to spot the exact moment of her death. Do we know when she dies? According to Klata, Ophelia's death occurred already in 3:1, when Polonius and Gertrude asked her to spy on Hamlet. The dainty figure of a German actress, Xenia Snagowski, walked on stage in her azure dress, soaking wet and cold, with red hair, shaking and scared. She drowned herself wittingly. Snagowski's Ophelia was manipulated by Jürgen Hartmann's Polonius, who was a ballet instructor, a brutal and heartless character, who whistled at his daughter every time he wanted to call her or discipline her. Ophelia's madness was expressed through a ballet dance; she was wearing a white tutu, black tights and ballet shoes, resembling Anastasiya Vertinskaya's doll-like Ophelia from Grigori Kozintsev's film adaptation of *Hamlet* (1964). In the funeral scene Ophelia was physically absent; Gertrude carried only an urn with her ashes and manifested her mourning through her black dress and solemn facial expression. The audience was not fooled; nobody on stage mourned Ophelia. Her funeral was another show put on by the court.

In the performance of *Hamlet* in Bochum music and books were used to express the inexpressible. Techno music, Pink Floyd, U2, covers of popular music from the 1980s accompanied the most significant moments in the lives of Klata's characters. Ubiquitous books scattered all over the stage served as pangs of conscience for contemporary audience. Klata said: "This play is about books which should be forgotten so that we could function properly in the modern world. At the beginning of the twenty-first century we start reading books and soon we forget about them, we only remember about those books which we find useful in our career, at work. After graduation people stop going to the theatre or

to the cinema, they stop reading. The contemporary society is forgetful. Capitalism needs effective action rather than splitting hairs” (Gruszczyński 10). Schaad’s Hamlet was the only character on stage who read books with understanding, but he must bury memory in order to be able to live and function in this world. Books are symbols of memory and intimacy, for which neither Hamlet nor any other member of the Danish court have the time. Klata sums up his play using a very provocative phrase, which is a blending of Polish and English, the type of language spoken by many young Poles these days to sound cool; he says: “Wykon rulez”, which can be translated as “Performance rules” (Gruszczyński 10).

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***The Taming of the Shrew* [Poskromienie złośnicy]. Dir. Katarzyna Deszcz. Stefan Żeromski Theatre, Kielce, Poland.**

Reviewed by **Jacek Fabiszak***

“So curst and shrewd” a play

There is no denying the fact that *Shrew* in the Western world poses a serious challenge, for a variety of reasons: it is misogynistic, it cannot match the complexity of Shakespeare’s mature romantic comedies, it is difficult to be adapted into a topical production which would address the thorny issues of the surrounding world if it is not radically changed into a feminist manifesto. It is a cliché, but such pitfalls abound in Shakespeare’s play and are very difficult to avoid.

The review should begin with the director’s (Katarzyna Deszcz) justification of the choice of the play one can find in the production’s programme (in Anna Zielińska’s interview with the director, “Katharina tames Katharina” [Katarzyna poskramia Katarzynę]):

Shakespeare’s text shows a very interesting mechanism: two strong personalities clash with each other; they [Petruccio and Katharina] are two independent people who reject the world’s routine. And this appeals to me as most topical. She does not tolerate the treatment of women as sexual objects. He is a playboy, a lazybones who throws money away, convinced that no woman can resist him. Neither Katharina nor Petruccio have ever met an equally strong personality of the opposite gender. Ergo, they have never loved anybody. (my translation from Polish)

In other words, what the director found topical in the play was the two major figures’ social independence, albeit in two different, indeed contradictory ways; what they also share is not only strong personality, but rising to challenges, too.

As a result, the main characters in the production—Petruccio (Krzysztof Grabowski) and Katharina (Wiktoria Kulaszewska)—are presented as social misfits and rebels, rejecting for their own reasons the patriarchal social norms, whereby women are men’s property and men are supposed to be serious and responsible. The latter is manifested in the men’s mercantile attitude towards the world, in which only businesses are conducted and deals are struck. Petruccio certainly maintains an ironic distance from this attitude; it is visible in both his treatment of the other figures and the (in)famous scene of the wedding at which he arrives inappropriately dressed. In the production, the spectators wonder for

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a long while what is wrong with his clothing (his servants implore him to change), since he is wearing a black frock coat, apparently only proper for a wedding. The puzzle is solved as soon as he turns his back on the auditorium: a part of his trousers is missing, the part that should cover his buttocks. The effect is crudely comic (yet it works), and equally crudely demonstrating *his* attitude to the rest of the world.

Petruchio tries to teach Kate the same. They do become *partners* in the end, which is signalled by, among other things, the costumes they (don't) wear: from the scene in Petruchio's house, when the dress for Katharina is shredded by her husband, till the end of the production they are both clothed in underwear only. In this way, Petruchio is ready to share his wife's discomfort, but on his own terms. It becomes part of the taming process. The scene in Petruchio's house ends the first part of the production; during the interval the actors playing the main parts do not leave the stage, but stay on it, occupying opposing ends and staring at each other, continuing the silent tug-of-war of the sexes. The silence is very important in the production; with the stress on the comedy mainly on the verbal plane contained in the modern translation by Stanisław Barańczak (so much praised by critics) and, judging by the reaction of the audience, very effective; silence becomes the verbal and non-verbal (laughter) comedy's opposite, indeed not only a sign of rejecting the verbal bargaining so characteristic of the world of business and "tickling commodity" in which transactions are carried out by means of bidding, but also an indication of Katharina's tragedy. What is interesting about the treatment of silence and verbosity/loudness in the production is that Katharina remains silent for quite a long time, and when she talks, as the director observes, she never shouts, which is the way she expresses her anger, which, with her hard facial expression, becomes very convincing. That same silence, hard face, and calm words become, too, a token of Katharina's suffering, especially in view of the fact that these elements of Kulaszewska's performance do not change in the course of the production.

On the other extreme there is Petruchio with his Baroque and lavish language, also defying the middle ground, as it were, with his extravagancy. However, there is no suffering in it, but the opposite: hedonistic pleasure and cynicism, shrouding the world of business in a cloud of excessive verbosity, lacking the concrete but emphasising the grotesque.

And it is Petruchio's flamboyance that inevitably will need to prevail. Significantly enough it is *a man* (Petruchio) who, being wiser and merrier, allegedly intellectually and definitely physically superior, teaches and instructs *a woman* (Katharina). The process of teaching involves not only taking off outerwear and linguistic bullying, but also very physical coercion, a kind of domestic violence, when, in their first encounter, Petruchio and Katharina come to blows. As a result, Kate is being both psychologically and physically broken.

Strolling in the foyer of the theatre in the interval one could not help noticing a lifesize picture of a couple dressed in Renaissance fashion in which a man (husband?) was protectively leaning over a woman (wife?). What struck the spectator was that instead of their faces there were oval holes in the picture, inviting the spectators to fill them with their faces and possibly take a photo. This very picture was employed by the director as an important property for Katharina's last speech: this time, it is both her and Petruchio who put their heads into the openings. Not only are the characters metatheatrically 'dressed' in this way; this trick primarily serves as a distancing device, whereby Katharina's submissive monologue is not treated seriously (perhaps it was serious in the Renaissance, as the clothing in the picture suggests, but not anymore). The director reinforces the message by reversing the traditional, patriarchal social roles in this scene: it is Katharina's face that tops the man's silhouette in the picture, while Petruchio's tops that of the woman. Yet even this reversal of roles is not enough to change significantly the original meaning of Katharina's speech, since the spectators cannot erase from their memory the image of Petruchio beating Katharina.¹ Deszcz's remarks about the taming and its effects sound ironic and unconvincing in this context: "She [Kate] matures to accept the world's mediocrity, when she meets a man who looks at her with equally open eyes"—the spectator does not leave the theatre with an impression that Katharina does "perform" only the part of an obedient wife. Lidia Cichocka soberly comments on the process of taming in the production and its tongue-in-cheek effect: "It is difficult to speak about mutual respect in the scenes where the couple appear. Petruchio calms Katharina, he brainwashes her as long as he reaches his aim—absolute obedience". This brainwashing effect may be further noticed in yet another element shaping the ending of the production: the well-known disco polo² song "Ona tańczy dla mnie" [She dances for me], which, on the one hand, emphasises the completion of taming, on the other, though, highlights the farcical atmosphere of the production.³

Bianca (Zuzanna Wierzbińska) naturally constitutes the opposite of Katharina; not only does she easily accommodate to "the world's mediocrity", as the director had it, but even fully embraces it by living up to the image of a sexually attractive girl whose main desire is to seduce men and/or grant them sexual satisfaction. Her extremely short dress and sensual body language are a grotesque picture of the ideal woman in a man's world. Bianca takes advantage of the social system and skilfully manipulates men. The director sees her as

¹ Lidia Cichocka, too, begins her review with a clear-cut declaration: "An attempt to tame Shakespeare's sexist views is an aborted one in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Even the switching of the social roles did not help much in the last scene".

² Music characterised by simple lyrics and melody; barnyard music.

³ I would like to thank Urszula Kizelbach for pointing this aspect of the production to me.

“coldly calculating her future, accepting the fact that the world treats her as a sexual and bargain commodity.” Wierzbińska is very convincing in expressing this attitude.

The production was awarded the Golden Yorick prize (for the best theatrical production of a Shakespeare play in Poland in the season) at the 18th Gdańsk Shakespeare Festival. The jury justified their decision in the following words: “Of all the plays in the competition, this one shows the most consistent style, consciously transferring interpretative accents and reversing plot schemes”. Definitely, one can agree with the consistency of style: rather modern costuming, economical arrangement of the stage design, and careful use of multimedia in the scenes of “taming”: a silent fragment of Zeffirelli’s film version of *Shrew* with Burton and Taylor is screened, perhaps as yet another estranging and distancing device, to parenthesize the onstage taming. Krzysztof Sowiński also emphasised the nature of the excerpt from the movie: “Katharina (Wiktoria Kulaszewska) [...] and Petruchio (Krzysztof Grabowski) [act] [...] as if they were saying, after the director: this interpretation has already been shown, no need to repeat it, let’s then just quote it”.

As mentioned above, the stage design is far from lavish and/or realistic. The stage is divided into two parts by means of a light metal and glass structure which can be turned into Baptista Minola’s house and ... a butcher’s shop.⁴ It is important to note that Baptista Minola’s profession is typically male, which of course fits in the patriarchal system (a butcher processing meat is a symbol of masculine power). There is something mafia-like in the representation of Minola, especially when he carves meat with his huge knife.⁵ Other tokens of mobster roguery include the Pedant (Artur Słaboń), who is presented as a petty criminal, dressed in a black shirt and suit and wielding fire arms. Indeed, a sinister world, where women are treated instrumentally, or—as Bianca’s case shows—can use it to their advantage.

The light metal structure (designed by Andrzej Sadowski), with an upper gallery, has different functions. It can be a row of houses or the façade of

⁴ Agnieszka Gołębiowska characteristically entitled her online review of the production “Sex and violence, czyli sklep mięsny z kobietami” [Sex and violence, or a butcher’s shop with women], although she does not elaborate on this train of thought saying that “the noble father wants to sell his pliable daughter Bianca to the highest celebrity-bidder only after he has just been chopping meat” (Gołębiowska b).

⁵ Krzysztof Warlikowski in 1998 directed a version of *The Taming of the Shrew* for the TR theatre in Warsaw. In his highly metatheatrical production, the masculine world is also equalled with the world of mafia (even more forcefully than in Deszcz’s *Shrew*). Naturally, it is probably linked with an attempt to signal “Italianness” on stage (a reference to the Cosa Nostra). Interestingly enough, the artistic director of the Żeromski theatre, Piotr Szczerski, remarked that the fictional world of the production is “mediocre [and] mafia-like” (Gołębiowska a).

Minola's house. The upper gallery is a window, like those on the Elizabethan stage. What is beyond the openwork structure, is the interior of a house, a chamber or a bedroom, as, for example, in the scene when Bianca finally lures Lucentio (Wojciech Niemczyk) into a sexual embrace on a couch/sofa. As a result, the stage can be easily transformed into a number of localities, which the audience at the Shakespeare Festival very much appreciated with their hands. Naturally, the director and stage designers drew here on both the highly conventional nature of Elizabethan drama and its meta-theatricality, so manifest in *The Shrew*, where the play proper is in fact a play within (the producers did not keep the Induction, relying on other metatheatrical devices).

The costuming matches the stage design in that it is apparently modernised and rather universal, but uses the clichés of masculine vs feminine. Thus, the men are dressed in suits, whereas women are supposed to wear short skirts/miniskirts. The suits are complete with the jacket, matching (or not) vest, and trousers; the dress is of course white, humble in more or less covering the upper part, but leaving no doubt as to what is revealed below the waist. In that respect Katharina's wedding dress, which is just cast onto her (she does not *properly* don it), or the underwear she bravely wears till the end of the production, are tokens of her refusal to accept the dominant male position in the world in favour of a world where, male or no male, people should be treated with dignity, no matter how they dress, what gender they are, where they come from. This might have been a strong voice, had it not been for the representation of the taming process. After all, Katharina does deliver her final speech.

The ending of the production, the transition from the world of the stage to the empirical world shared by actors and spectators, was, in the performance I saw, an interesting although most likely accidental (I was not sure it was part of the theatrical routine) summing up of Deszcz's *Shrew*. At the curtain calls, Petruchio/Grabowski (in his underwear) brought a white bathrobe for Katharina/Kulaszewska to cover her ... exactly what? nudity (she was not naked)? discomfort (she did not display any)? or perhaps because she was cold? Anyway, what I saw on that very day in Gdańsk was Katharina/Kulaszewska clearly flinching when Petruchio/Grabowski put the robe onto her arms, but eventually accepting it. The interpretation of that incident I have been toying with in my imagination is: was it part of the lacking ending of the Induction, which Shakespeare failed to provide us with, or was it the actress's disdain for her fellow colleague's pathetic attempts to live up to the image of a gallant Pole, or was it (which I would like to find most likely) a genuine rejection of the patriarchal dominance? I want, for the sake of Kulaszewska's brilliant performance, to have been so theatrically enchanted.

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