

## Theatre Reviews

***Richard III*. Dir. Snežana Trišić. National Theatre, Belgrade, Serbia.**

Reviewed by **Zorica Bečanović Nikolić\***

An X-rayed crowned skull at the front page of the programme of *Richard III* at the National Theatre, Belgrade, Serbia (April 2017), directed by Snežana Trišić, justly illustrates a deconstructive theatrical scan of politics, which the play brings about. The famous Shakespearean anatomy of the Machiavellian rise and fall of the charismatic villain is attained through a complementary concurrence of acting and the transfiguring aspects of Valentin Svetozarev's set design.

Igor Đorđević as Richard Gloucester performs the first lines of the opening monologue as a public speech and one is immediately reminded of Ian McKellen in Richard Loncraine's 1995 film, including the famous Loncraine's cut at the line "But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks..." which situates Richard in the lavatory, where he can be callously open with his self-perception and his "inductions dangerous". At the sight of Richard's toilet posture and his back turned toward the audience, we could hasten to accuse the director of plagiarism, but she is quick to persuade us that it is rather an instance of hyper-textual / hyper-performative transmedia development of an idea. From that moment on, it is clear that the set design is given a remarkable semantic significance in this production. A filmed close-up of Richard's face is projected on the moving gates and pillars, which have been transfigured from a dignified archway background for his public speech into a presumed loo. Huge dire metal shapes fill the entire stage. Their nerve-wracking spatial transfiguration produces an ominous disfiguration of Richard's facial traits, and, consequently, of his utterance and his announced ensuing political plots and treacheries. The face is hidden from us physically—his undersized body appears as even lesser, withdrawn in the small symbolic loo-space—but at the same time the magnified close-up is glaringly pushed vis-à-vis the audience, allowing us a direct encounter with his mind. Thus begins a kaleidoscopic nightmare "full of sound and fury".

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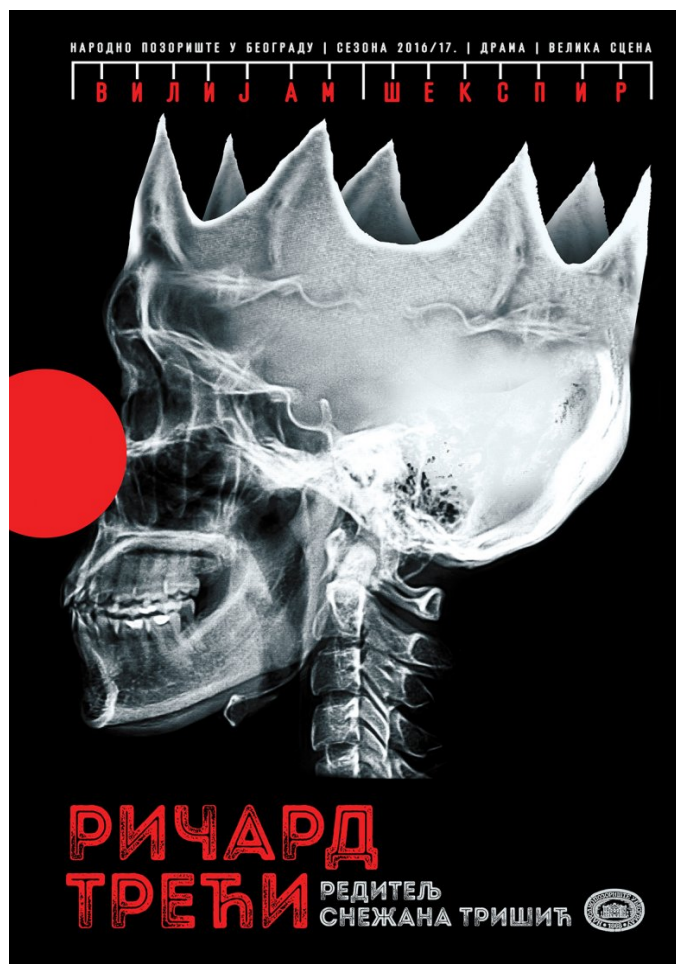
\* University of Belgrade.

The actors are clothed in sombre, timeless modern clothes, or, in case of Richard and his mother, timeless regal costumes, designed by Marina Vukasović Medenica. Some characters appear with their faces heavily painted in white and grey, like Lord Hastings, Earl Rivers and the assassins, while the protagonists work out their natural faces. Richard's face is bare and Igor Đorđević lives up to the demanding mixture of hypocrisy, cynicism, humour and irony. Svetlana Bojković, the *prima donna* of Serbian theatre, as the Duchess of York, appears with a heavily painted face, which only underlines her powerful acting presence, sometimes at the price of overshadowing the others. Among the other three female characters, Nataša Ninković's Queen Margaret stands out as a compellingly contemptuous, sardonic, mordant mirror for the Yorks. Lady Anne's appearances as the crowned queen and a caring aunt of Edward IV's sons are omitted in this adaptation, leaving Vanja Ejđus with a cameo-role in the controversial funeral-seduction scene. Her verbal duel with Richard oscillates between real pathos and pathetic feebleness but the climax of an electrifying erotic frisson between Richard and Anne leaves us with convincing impression of a Bataillean transgressive erotic limit-experience. The moment of irrational erotic climax is hers rather than his, and she is excellent in performing a sensation Lady Anne couldn't avoid. And we see her no more.

The adaptation, made by Snežana Trišić, Slavko Milanović and Slobodan Obradović, brings an obvious presentist political statement. There is no Mayor of London. There are no citizens. Richard and Buckingham are shown as profiting from the omnipresent social blindness, lacking any public critical opposition. The political scene seems to be theirs and theirs only, fulfilled with manipulations, with no opposition, with credulous acceptance of their machinations, with shameless interests ready to meet theirs. This is a disillusioned presentation of the current political apathy of a considerable part of the Serbian society, as well as of the readiness of average voters worldwide to be (un)willingly caught in the webs of populist political hypocrisy. The famous instance of Shakespeare's own demystification of political spinning and instrumental political narratives, in Scrivener's commentary of the condemnation of Lord Hastings (III, 6), is left out. Not even that little fissure in the general uncritical illusion and acceptance of the blatant political lies is allowed. That intervention is perhaps too much, it makes the message simpler and one-dimensional, but it emphasises the warning. The Archbishop of York and the Bishop of Ely are merged into one character. Sir William Catesby and Sir James Tyrrel are also made one—an unscrupulous, ambitious lesser politician ready to pursue his own interests in collaboration with those in power, at any cost. As a survivor who outlives Richard, Catesby, motivated by the same duplicitous profitable servility, welcomes the victorious new ruler Henry (Richmond) Tudor. Contrary to the idealistic interpretations of the "Tudor myth",

the “grand mechanism” in this adaptation seems to go on. And thus the play ends.

The already mentioned transformable set design maintains its significance throughout the performance. The emptiness of the stage, as well as the provisional exteriors and interiors reminiscent of fascist architecture, are saturated with telling political messages. Parallel to the transmedia disfiguration of Richard’s face during the opening monologue, Richmond’s speech at the end of the play, otherwise known as a famous expression of Tudor optimism, is presented as a clip with another close-up projected on the moving pillars and gates. This time, the face is Richmond’s, but the director’s deconstructive intention is the same as in the opening one. Given the historical distance and the present globalised political disillusionment, this performance leaves us with the impression that all politicians, the “good” and the “bad”, seem, alas, to be the same.



***The House of Mac-Beth.* By Panagiotis Mentis. Dir. Kostis Kapelonis. Art Theatre Karolos Koun, Athens, Greece.**

Reviewed by *Xenia Georgopoulou*\*

In October 2017 the Art Theatre Karolos Koun first presented Panagotis Mentis's *The House of Mac-Beth*, a new play based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The play was written especially for a group of three actors (Gianna Malakate, Iro Kosti and Giorgos Stavrianos) who wanted to work together—and with director Kostis Kapelonis. In his interview for *Cue* Kapelonis confided to Ivi Vassiliou that the original idea, before they asked Mentis to write a play, was to create an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* for three actors, the parts being the Macbeths and a witch.<sup>1</sup> Mentis did write a play for three, and two of the characters were obviously the Macbeths; however, he chose for the third character a prostitute that comments on the politics of a world she knows too well.

Just before the show, on the day of the premiere, I bumped into the author at the entrance of the theatre. When I told him that I teach Shakespeare, he said that his play mostly consists of his own writing, rather than Shakespeare's. However, while watching the production, I realised that, despite the fact that Shakespeare's text was indeed hardly there, and his numerous characters were reduced to the Macbeth couple (Mentis's Mac and Beth<sup>2</sup>), Shakespeare's presence was everywhere.

In his prologue to the play (which also appears in the theatre programme) the playwright refers to his debt to Shakespeare: "The couple MAC-BETH is the eternal reference to desire and passion for power. The procedures of conquest are nightmarishly predetermined in the before and after of the existence of the monstrous "House" whose story was written by Shakespeare, who recorded with

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\* University of Athens.

<sup>1</sup> "Ο Κωστής Καπελώνης μιλά για τον Οίκο ΜακΜπεθ" ["Kostis Kapelonis talks about the House of MacBeth"], interview to Ivi Vassiliou, *Cue*, 17-10-2017, accessed 29-11-2017, <<https://cuetoenter.wordpress.com/2017/10/17/o-kostis-kapelonis-mila-giaton-oiko-macbeth/>>.

<sup>2</sup> As far as Greek adaptations of the play are concerned, Mentis was not the first to split the name of the Shakespearean couple into Mac and Beth; so did Raia Mouzenidou in her own adaptation entitled *When Mac Met Beth* in 2008 (the play was published in 2011). Unlike Mouzenidou, however, who kept most of Shakespeare's characters, Mentis focused on the Macbeth couple, as did Theodoros Espiritou in his adaptation of *Macbeth* for two actors, in a production entitled *Macbeth. The Bible of Darkness*, presented in 2015 (see my review of the production in *Multicultural Shakespeare* 13 (2016), 145-48).

psychoanalytical mastery the underground and mysterious paths that the brain transforms into actions”.<sup>3</sup>

The director Kostis Kapelonis regards Mentis’s play as a “political, psychological thriller about modern European political reality”;<sup>4</sup> indeed, there are references to the European Parliament, terrorism, the power of the media etc. However, Kapelonis also traces the timelessness of the story: “In a scenery of the near future but also of the dark Middle Ages the ascent to power, the conquest of the crown or the leadership of the party has had the same rules for centuries”.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere he adds: “The democracy of the Western world is pregnant with the danger of its abolishment, while next to it still survive obscurantist and barbarous remnants of an obscurantist past that refuses to disappear. There are times when I think that the world, instead of going forward, goes at full speed towards some neo-medieval period.”<sup>6</sup>

The timelessness of the story, underlined by both the playwright and the director, was also underscored in the production by the minimal set and costumes, also designed by the director, which referred to no particular age. Mac’s outfit combined tights (alluding, perhaps, to the Middle Ages), a short skirt (most probably an allusion to the Scottish kilt), and the upper part of a suit, with a shirt and tie (regularly worn by politicians and businessmen); Beth’s dresses (a plain white one in the beginning of the production and a more dress-up black one after Mac’s appointment as the leader of the party) could allude to different periods; and the prostitute wore the archetypal black sexy outfit worn by most of her modern colleagues. The set, mainly consisting of a multi-functional table and a couple of panels mostly used to separate the inside from the outside settings of the play (that is, the places where the couple and the prostitute are seen, respectively), was mostly covered with transparent nylon sheets, as if to denote that once people are involved in politics, their life becomes transparent (and their sins visible).

Although Mentis’s third character is not a witch, the presence of the Shakespearean “wayward sisters” was echoed from the very beginning of the

<sup>3</sup> Παναγιώτης Μέντης [Panagiotis Mentis], “Σημείωμα του συγγραφέα” [“Playwright’s Note”], in Παναγιώτης Μέντης, *Οίκος Μακ-Μπεθ* [*The House of Mac-Beth*], Athens: Αιγόκερως, 2017, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Κωστής Καπελώνης [Kostis Kapelonis], “Σημείωμα του σκηνοθέτη” [“Director’s Note”], in Mentis, *The House of Mac-Beth*, 7. In his interview for *Cue* Kapelonis describes the play as “a political thriller about post-democratic society” (“Kostis Kapelonis talks...”).

<sup>5</sup> Kapelonis, “Director’s Note”, 7.

<sup>6</sup> “Kostis Kapelonis talks...”. In her review of the production Tonia Karaoglou notes that the show oscillates between Shakespeare and the television series *House of Cards* (Τόνια Καραόγλου, “Οίκος Μακ-Μπεθ” [“The House of Mac-Beth”], *Αθηνόραμα* [*Athinorama*], 30-10-2017, accessed 29-11-2017, <[http://www.athinorama.gr/theatre/article/oikos\\_mak\\_mpth-2524603.html](http://www.athinorama.gr/theatre/article/oikos_mak_mpth-2524603.html)>).

show (though not in the play itself). Kapelonis opened his production with the voices of the three witches singing part of Shakespeare's lines in English in a dark, ominous tune composed by Kalliopi. Right afterwards, in a different melody that alluded to a particular genre of contemporary Greek popular music, the witches sang Shakespeare's lines in Greek.

Apart from the witches' words, added by the director, small excerpts from (or echoes of) the Shakespearean text are found here and there in the play. Mentis also used an extract from Michael Damiralis's 1905 translation (written in a somewhat archaic Greek), namely part of Macbeth's monologue after Duncan's murder, about the king's guards and the voices in his mind. The "If we fail?" dialogue is also there, somewhat altered, and so is Lady Macbeth's claim that she would kill her own child if it were an obstacle to their ascent, as well as her berating her husband for his cowardice. Moreover, Mentis keeps the motif of the permanent, unwashable blood stains on the hands of the murderer. Particular elements of the plot are also found in Mentis's text: The couple invites the Leader of the party to their home, with a plan to kill him; the Leader's son is supposed to succeed him in the leadership of the party; Mac's close friend is called Bank (obviously Banquo's counterpart), and has a son, too; both the Leader and Bank die under mysterious circumstances. Towards the end of the play Beth is found in a wheelchair, and the prostitute, who now takes care of her, comments on her troubled sleep.

The metadramatic references found in several of Shakespeare's plays are also present in Mentis's work. The play begins and ends with the same soliloquy about life as a stage, uttered in the beginning of the play by the actor playing Mac while he is getting dressed for the part and at the end by the prostitute in the street. Beth also speaks as an actress towards the end of the play, like the boy actor in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*; she says that she refused to die as Beth, and so she just travels to what sounds like an off-shore paradise, to take care of Mac's financial affairs until he joins her.

After I saw the show, it occurred to me that even the non-Shakespearean character of Mentis's play, that of the prostitute that comments on modern politics, a character that is "metaphysical and familiar at the same time", according to the director,<sup>7</sup> alluded to a Shakespearean motif, that of the character that moves in the periphery of society (such as the Bastard in *King John* or Jacques in *As You Like It*), who comments ironically or bitterly on contemporary politics or morals.

Despite his numerous Shakespearean connotations (which are only natural, since the play is based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*), Mentis's play is also very topical. In this short discussion I had with the playwright before the performance, he said that his Mac could represent a young Prime Minister of our time, even our own Prime Minister. Mentis's views in his prologue to the play

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<sup>7</sup> Kapelonis, "Director's Note", 7.

remind us indeed of what seems to be the attitude of a modern political leader: “The next day never interests the professional of power. The moment of conquest is his own eternity.”<sup>8</sup>

In this game of power and desire orchestrated by Kostis Kapelonis, Gianna Malakate caught Beth’s ambition and desire for control, Giorgos Stavrianos captured both Mac’s cautious mind and his insatiable desire for power, and Iro Kosti portrayed with admirable ease a woman that knows life better than anyone, this “protagonist of the drama of Life”.<sup>9</sup>



Gianna Malakate as Beth and Giorgos Stavrianos as Mac  
Photograph by Kostis Kapelonis

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<sup>8</sup> Mentis, “Playwright’s Note”, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Kapelonis, “Director’s Note”, 7.





Iro Kosti in the role of the prostitute. Photograph by Kostis Kapelonis