

Theatre Reviews

***King John*. Dir. Apostolis Psarros. Vault Theatre, Athens, Greece.**

Reviewed by *Xenia Georgopoulou**

King John for four

In March 2018 *King John* was staged in Greece after thirteen years; it was the second time the play was ever performed in the country. The first time was in 2004-2005, by Teatro tou Notou at the Amore Theatre, directed by Nikos Chatzopoulos in his own translation. For the 2018 production the director Apostolis Psarros also used Chatzopoulos's translation, which is undoubtedly the best existent translation of the play in Greek.

Apostolis Psarros made various alterations to the text. However, his cuts did not change the story or character of the play, and a few comical additions did not harm it, since the play itself includes a great deal of comical scenes. In fact, both of the other productions of the play that I can recall, that is, Chatzopoulos's at the Amore, but also Greg Doran's at the Swan in Stratford-upon-Avon in 2001, stressed this comical essence of the play.

In Psarros's production it took four actors (Irene Ioannou, Panagiotis Iossifidis, Nicoletta Panagiotou and the director himself) to perform the whole play. This also added to the comical character of the show, since several actors played two or three parts at the same time: the director himself played both kings, or King John and Hubert; Nicoletta Panagiotou played both Eleanor and Constance; Panagiotis Iossifidis at some point played three parts together (Pandolf, the Dauphin and the Bastard). However, the parts were very clear, thanks to the admirable energy of the actors, which enabled them to make amazingly quick role shifts.

In the beginning of the show, assuming that the Greek audience's knowledge of English history was most probably rather meager, Iossifidis gave a brief summary of what happens in the play, and subsequently asked the spectators questions on the plot, to see if they got it. The characters were

* Assistant Professor, Department of Theatre Studies, University of Athens, Greece.

presented on the platforms one by one in the beginning of the show, dancing to rock music.

The set, designed by the director himself, consisted mainly of two small wheeled platforms, representing England and France, each one barely accommodating all four actors. When the union of Blanche and the Dauphin occurred on the stage, the two platforms were joined together, to be drawn apart again when Pandolf managed to make the two kings enemies again.

The costumes designed by Thomas Chouliaras, basically long garments with golden details, gave a general idea of the era, without representing every single character, since the swift shifts of parts among the actors did not leave time for costume changes. Instead, the characters involved were mentioned before every single scene. Additionally, the French had a distinctive French accent, and Blanche had a Spanish accent.

The choice of musical pieces, which included various rock songs, Greek popular repertoire (old and new) and more, was particularly interesting, and definitely underlined the atmosphere of the individual scenes. For example, “O, Fortuna” from Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana* was murmured by the cast while Pandolf was speaking, and a popular song (rebetiko) on profit (Marcos Vamvakaris’s “To Simferon”) echoed the Bastard’s speech on commodity. The deaths of both Arthur and King John were followed by Thanassis Papaconstantinou’s lullaby “The King”, with which the show ended.

Despite the comical character of the whole production, the dramatic tone found in several scenes was not lost. Although Psarros gave comical overtones even to the scene of little Arthur’s death, the audience could still be enormously moved by the little boy (played by Irene Ioannou) holding a paper boat, which he left behind in his place when he died, waving goodbye to it.

In an interview he gave to Constantinos Platis for www.theatromania.gr Apostolis Psarros argued that, although the characters act to their own profit by manipulating each other, and despite their caricaturesque nature, they still have human qualities and passions.¹ The director apparently kept this in mind throughout the play, creating a show that was both enjoyable and moving.

¹ ‘Συνέντευξη με τον Αποστόλη Ψαρρό για την παράσταση “Βασιλιάς Ιωάννης”’, *Θεατρομάνια*, 27-3-2018, <<https://www.theatromania.gr/synentefxi-ton-apostoli-psarrogia-tin-parastasi-vasilias-ioannis/>>, accessed 26-5-2018.



Photographs by Maria Spendou

***The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Dir. Paweł Aigner. Presented by the Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre and the Wybrzeże Theatre, Gdańsk, Poland.**

Reviewed by *Agnieszka Rasmus**

The opening of the Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre in September 2014 was a memorable event of historical significance and a dream come true for its main visionary and director, professor Jerzy Limon. Although by many a Gdańsk citizen the almost black brick building is considered to be a bit of an eye-sore, its pine interior offers a much more welcoming space, whose design is familiar to those who have visited the Globe or the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. However, this unique architectural structure had to wait another year to reveal its full potential. In the summer of 2015, during The Gdańsk Shakespeare Festival, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, a co-production of the Gdańsk Theatre and the nearby Wybrzeże Theatre, brought the stage magically to life and showed doubters and non-believers that it could serve as a veritable time capsule, transporting us to the times of Shakespeare's lively theatrical tradition.

The Merry Wives of Windsor was carefully selected, prepared and executed to coincide with and celebrate the 400-year-old theatrical tradition of the Gdańsk Fencing School, which stood nearby and was often visited by English travelling players. Paweł Aigner's *Merry Wives* paid tribute to that tradition but at the same time seemed to open a new chapter in the history of Shakespeare productions in Poland, serving as an example that in capable hands the old and the new can be combined into a potent mix that is then uniformly endorsed by a Polish public unaccustomed to such a theatrical convention.

Visually, the production may have appeared modest with stage designer Magdalena Gajewska's selection of a few wooden, wicker and linen props, all in accordance with Elizabethan stage practice, if it was not for the lavish costumes designed by Zofia De Ines. At first clearly identifiable as Elizabethan dress, on closer inspection they revealed a number of contemporary influences from the work of the British fashion designer Vivien Westwood to Burberry tartan. For example, Falstaff's cronies looked like a group of ageing punks. Clad in leather, with heavy boots, chains and sporting a Mohawk, Bardolf (Maciej Szemiel), Pistol (Mirosław Krawczyk) and Nym (Jerzy Gorzko) made a perfect impression of three old boys who should have known better and stopped rock-n-rolling years ago (Fig. 1). Mistress Quickly, played by Katarzyna Figura, on the other hand, wore a Burberry style head-scarf and a dress that dazzled with colourful check patterns, all of which made her stand out from other female characters by giving her a more frivolous and free-spirited air.

* Institute of English Studies, University of Łódź, Poland.



Fig. 1. Photograph by Dawid Linkowski

The audience was able to admire these beautiful costumes up close largely thanks to the new stage layout. For the first time since the theatre's opening we were able to witness the malleability and full potential of its movable stage. Abandoning the classical setup for the thrust stage of Shakespeare's times was the key to the production's overall look and tone as well as its acting style and stage movement. Not only did the standing audience have access to the stage from three sides, allowing them an unprecedented proximity to the actors from multiple perspectives, but also they had the chance to literally mingle with them as the performers often joined "the groundlings", addressed them directly, threw items of clothing at them, or simply asked for a light. Such lively interaction together with the actors' unhindered movement, which often extended from the acting area into the auditorium, were the main driving force behind the show and defined it throughout by the performers' vitality, rule-breaking and anarchic spirit.

From the opening scene the actors appeared to be literally exploding with energy, running around, jumping and performing almost circus-like acts, as in the case of Falstaff's (Grzegorz Gzyl) backflip. Their perpetual mobility was carefully crafted to create the sense of chaos. The few calmer moments were equally amusing when, for example, a fast-paced fencing duel between Sir Hugo Evans (Michał Jaros) and Doctor Caius (Piotr Biedroń) was performed in slow motion, in reference to the fighting scenes in *The Matrix*, or when Falstaff was

pondering which fake belly to wear looking at a selection of different-size bellies hanging on a line. The scene with Falstaff examining his paunch in the mirror was parodied by stage hands/Peter Simple (Marcin Miodek), who was pretending to be his reflection and made the audience laugh by touching his genitals instead of the belly or by confusing hands (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Photograph by Dawid Linkowski

In fact, the malleability of the Gdańsk Theatre's stage could only be rivalled by the antics of a veritable face contortionist—Marcin Miodek—in the role of Peter Simple, who turned a small and rather insignificant part into a starring one. Almost stealing the show in some of the scenes, Miodek's Peter Simple was a hunchback with his tongue sticking out and his entire body resembling a huge question mark, perpetually lost and wondering. His facial grimaces and twisted figure caused roars of laughter whenever he appeared on stage.

This is not to say that the production was a one man show. On the contrary, the coordination of the fast-paced stage movement and numerous antics required a real ensemble to pull it off. Like in a supposedly chaotic jazz band, every member of the cast was allowed his/her five minutes of comedy virtuoso acting and no one was overshadowed, as each character was a unique, heavily drawn caricature with his/her own easily recognizable and memorable idiosyncrasy. The production's comedic potential was, therefore, the sum of all

its parts rather than a star vehicle for any one actor. Thus, even though Grzelak's Falstaff held the audience's gaze and commanded the stage with his powerful bodily presence, he never upstaged the other actors in any scene, aiming instead for comedic synergy.

Using Elizabethan conventions allowed for one more type of "rule-breaking". In a playful reference to cross-dressing from Shakespeare's times, the character of Abraham Slender was performed by an actress, Dorota Androsz, which further added to the overall comedic effect. It also made one aspect of the production doubly clear: that it was not about realism or character psychology but a celebration of a different kind of theatre altogether, whose early roots go as far back as street performances in town market squares.

The experiment was thus unprecedented for a number of reasons, let alone the fact that the actors were required to perform the play almost every day throughout the summer of 2015, which is not the custom of Polish theatres, where a single performance is usually put on only a few times a month. This meant that some characters had to be played by two different actors with the exception of Falstaff and his followers, Fenton, Robert Shallow, Abraham Slender, George Page, Peter Simple and Mistress Alicia Ford. The intensity of the experience for the cast must have been another reason behind their high levels of energy channelled in order to sustain the production's demands from show to show. The existence of the two casts also meant that there was no room for routine and repetitiveness, as each performance allowed for, if not required, a dose of improvisation.

The challenge of the thrust layout in the Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre was thus turned to the production's main advantage. Director Paweł Aigner realised that, to breathe life into the text and stage it successfully, he had to draw from Elizabethan stage conventions and combine them with contemporary elements. The production showed above all else that the Polish audience was able to adapt quickly to the new rules of the game. The proximity to the actors, whose contagious energy and humour spread into the auditorium, allowed the spectators to enjoy Shakespeare's comedy and to imagine for a while what it could have been like four hundred years ago.

***Macbeth*. Dir. Agata Duda-Gracz. Capitol Music Theatre, Wrocław, Poland.**

Reviewed by *Sebastian Tonn**

Bloody *Macbeth*

Macbeth, directed by Agata Duda-Gracz, premiered at the Capitol Music Theatre in October 2017. The interpretation of Duda-Gracz is full of blood, brutality and eroticism. The stage and every character of the play is bathed in blood and no one of them can escape from iniquity. In numerous interviews Agata Duda-Gracz underlined the importance of historical realism in the story of *Macbeth*. In the 11th-century Scotland created by her, murders and rapes are a typical part of human life. From this perspective, the regicide committed by *Macbeth* is a relentless way to gain power.

One of the most original aspects of the play is the scenography. The bloody platform is a slope¹ which leads to the proscenium. During the play red corpses roll down the platform several times, creating a corporal carpet. Another aspect of the scenography is *Macbeth* himself: He lies on a platform, confined in a square created by light. He is the main point of the stage and the main point of the story. However, Duda-Gracz's *Macbeth* is passive. He is on the stage all the time but he does not move from his place. It is the fate of a tragic figure who has to kill because there is no other way to become king. *Macbeth* knows that if he does not kill, somebody else will. It is the natural law of 11th-century Scotland.

Cezary Studniak as *Macbeth* is too sensitive. He looks like a person who does not belong in such wild times. After Duncan's murder *Macbeth* does not arouse fear but rather pity. *Macbeth*'s soliloquies are more intensive than his bloody actions, which reveal his tragedy at the expense of his brutality. Cezary Studniak is more a Hamlet than a *Macbeth*.

Agata Duda-Gracz added one very important thread: Lady *Macbeth* is raped by King Duncan. This changes the original story significantly. First of all, Lady *Macbeth* has an additional motive to kill Duncan and, more importantly, *Macbeth* does too. In medieval Scotland revenge was an acceptable reason for murder. Secondly, Duncan is not a beloved king but a tyrant. After his death nobody will waste any tears crying over him. The life of Duda-Gracz's Duncan

* PhD candidate, British and Commonwealth Studies Department, University of Łódź, Poland.

¹ In 1955 Jan Kosiński's wrote a project of a staging of *Macbeth*. According to this project, the stage should be a large sloping platform. Agata Duda-Gracz has never mentioned if she was inspired by Kosiński's project.

is not worth as much as the life of Shakespeare's Duncan. In light of this, it is easier to absolve the main character.

Magda Kumorek as Lady Macbeth is a cauldron of anger, sorrow and desire, where the latter defines the relationship between her and Macbeth. There is no romantic love in this marriage. There is only passion, which culminates on the stage when the bloody couple has sexual intercourse. After the king's death Lady Macbeth becomes a different person. At the beginning she looks like a true queen. Kumorek stands tall with a tight face expressing firmness and iciness. Over the course of time she falls into madness. During the famous scene of somnambulism Lady Macbeth is sitting on the proscenium and looking straight ahead with empty eyes. In front of her is a toy horse. The picture painted by Duda-Gracz demonstrates the deep sorrow of a mother who has lost a child. On the other hand, Lady Macbeth is like a lost ball in high weeds, and cannot carry the burden of bloody sin. This kind of role can only be acted properly by an actress of extraordinary skills—and I consider Magda Kumorek skillful enough.



Photograph by Greg Noo-Wak

In the poster for Duda-Gracz's *Macbeth* there is neither Macbeth nor Lady Macbeth but Hecate. It is no mistake because this character is essential for the story presented by Duda-Gracz. Hecate is a black angel, literally and figuratively. She has black wings and red eyes. Her appearance signals that she comes from a different world. Nobody sees her, although she is present on the stage all the time. She represents evil, which controls every aspect of human life. She walks around like a predator spying a victim. But Hecate in this production

also has the meta-role of a narrator. Emose Uhunmwangho as Hecate sings all the lines about the story of Macbeth in English.

In the shade of Hecate there are the three Witches. They look totally different from Shakespeare's Witches. Duda-Gracz's Weird Sisters are juvenile and they flaunt an eroticism in stark contrast to the bearded and ugly Shakespearean depiction. In some scenes they are lying on the sloping stage in ambiguous positions, with one of them showing the audience a bare breast.

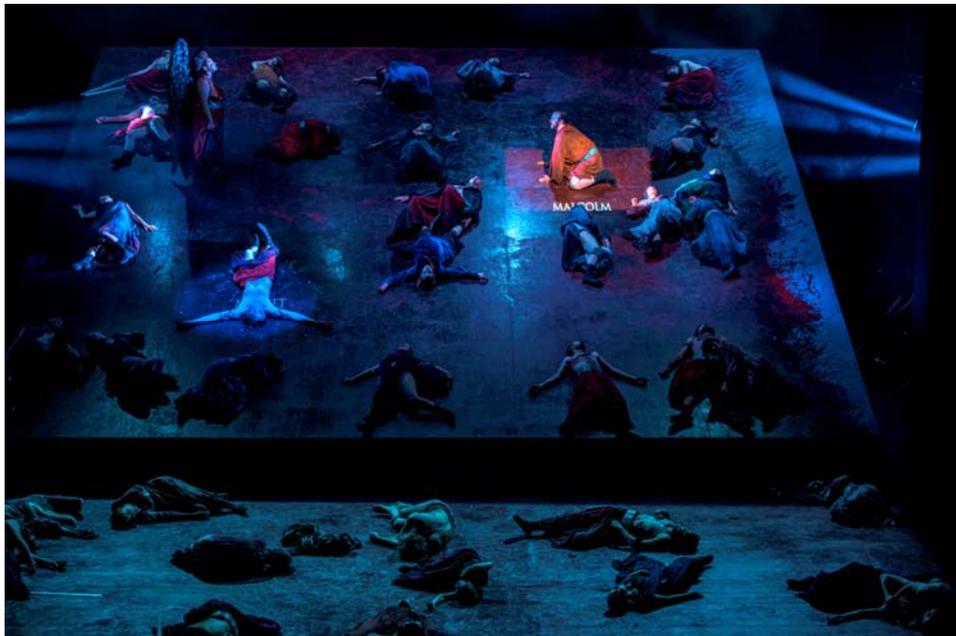
It is worth mentioning Malcolm as one more interesting character as interpreted in this particular production. Duda-Gracz's Malcolm is a psychopath who treats killing as entertainment. While he talks with Macduff, he reveals his tendencies towards murderous acts. Malcolm is not only heir to the throne but also heir to terror. His psychopathic inclinations contrast with his effete behaviour. Malcolm encourages Macduff to take revenge on Macbeth as if he was trying to seduce him. After Macbeth's death Malcolm falls in front of Hecate becoming a tool in her hands. The square of light which was restraining Macbeth starts to restrain Malcolm.



Photograph by Greg Noo-Wak

Duda-Gracz's *Macbeth* is a play where the extras are as important as the main characters. They create a bloody world that echoes with screaming women and clashing swords in every scene. The director underscores the importance of the extras by giving them names.

Agata Duda-Gracz demonstrates in her interpretation of *Macbeth* that the story of a general who murders the king to gain power was a norm in 11th-century Scotland. Macbeth is not a devil; he is a hostage of time and place. Jan Kott would say that Macbeth is a hostage of the Grand Mechanism. There is no escape from the Grand Mechanism, which is bigger than life and has control over everyone. It is not a new approach to the interpretation of *Macbeth* on the stage, but Duda-Gracz does more. She presents the Grand Mechanism as the beast in a bloody nightmare, because she understands that the Grand Mechanism is strongly connected with bloodshed and rape. I can imagine Jan Kott sitting in the front row in the Capitol Music Theatre and giving a standing ovation after the final scene of Duda-Gracz's *Macbeth*.



Photograph by Greg Noo-Wak