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Selection of reviews co-written by Nicoleta Cinpoș from

Play reviews Craiova International Shakespeare Festival, 23 April–6 May 2018

Edited by Nicoleta Cinpoș University of Worcester, UK and Janice Valls-Russell CNRS, University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, France

Midsummer Night's Dream, dir. Cristian Pepino for 'Țândărică' Animation Theatre (Bucharest, Romania), Buia Auditorium, Faculty of Agronomy, Craiova, 26 April 2018. Reviewed by: Nicoleta Cinpoș (University of Worcester) and Janice Valls-Russell (CNRS, University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3), with contributions from the panel. A Midsummer Night's Dream, Shakespeare's most popular comedy, is usually a safe bet with festival goers. In Craiova, its attraction was doubled by the fact that it was a 'Țândărică' Animation Theatre production, under the direction of Cristian Pepino, a name who has become synonymous with this theatre (which he joined back in 1986) and, indeed, with Romanian puppeteering tradition. In Pepino's interpretation – as director, stage designer, translator and script adapter – this sixty-minute Dream delivered on the Programme's promise: 'overflowing with humour, gags after gags, a nuanced play [read: performance], masterly harmonised with highly expressive puppets, who emerge and fade away, a simple décor; all configured to round this bittersweet picture'. The prospect of a 'puppet Dream' in the cosy and cool pocket theatre in the Faculty of Agronomy was an irresistible lunch-time invitation, even more alluring in the midsummer-like heat of this end of April. The small venue was turned into a black box by yards of black canvas which nestled the play's set at its centre: a puppet theatre framed with red curtain atop a five-metre wide and one-metre tall wooden wall structure, complete with artificial vegetation growing up it. This miniature set delineated the space on and behind which the main performance took place.

In 'Țândărică's *Dream*, all Athenians – rank regardless – were white wooden-faced and soft-limbed puppets, the tallest just reaching one metre, manipulated by humans. Theseus and Hippolyta looked identical as two puppets clad in red military dress – war decorations, parade hats and all – and sporting sun-shades like any celebrity. From their interaction, it became clear that Theseus may have been sporting the moustache, but in this marriage Hippolyta would be wearing the trousers. The young lovers were easily distinguishable, unlike in other *Dream* productions: the smallest of puppets, Hermia and Lysander wore denim jackets and eloped into the woods on an old Harley Davidson; one third taller, Helena towered over Hermia in stature; her elegant white empire dress may have hinted at Helena of Troy, but rendered her completely out of place both in this production's Athens and even more so in its woods. Demetrius was a lanky, bespectacled figure, taller than Lysander and Hermia but almost a head shorter than Helena. This production's Egeus didn't exert any authority, just hilarity through the mismatch between his northern Transylvanian shepherd outfit, complete with hat and big staff, and his southern (Wallachian) accent. As a result, his real concern for the safety of his daughter when in Lysander's company: 'Take your hands off her!', had the spectators in stitches as he repeated it in his regional (ungrammatical) delivery 'Ia mâna dupe ea!'

The Mechanicals came in all shapes and sizes, with Bottom visibly the more substantial puppet. The customary comedy of their scenes was enhanced by a lot of stage business/busyness; what clearly distinguished the Mechanicals from the other characters in the production, who spoke in rhymed

couplets, was that they used contemporary Romanian and their raucousness poked fun at recognisable old and new Romanian issues.

Magicked up with yards of black fabric, blackout and incense smoke, the woods outside this Athens were akin to a camera obscura in which illusions and delusions were equally at home. In this realm, royal fairies Oberon and Titania were humans dressed in black with enhanced qualities. In Oberon's case, these amounted to his inflated ego and his 'pre-Raphaelite' long and waiver red hair he let down with theatrical self-consciousness. Titania, on the other hand, had not two but four hands (like an Indian goddess), whose slow movement accompanied by incense smell and smoke increased the psychedelic effect her presence had on all. In the sexual encounter with Bottom, she grew ginormous thighs and legs – a clear sign that she was turned, by magic, into Oberon's puppet. This was clearly his payback for not relinquishing the Indian boy, in this production also a human character, highly bi-sexualised and equally happy to be with Titania *and* Oberon.

This *Dream* was as funny as it was uncanny – as warned by the 16+ certificate in the Programme. The war of the sexes and characters' dreams of success lost their light comedy touch and turned into a more sinister affair. The key agent in this was Puck: smallest of puppets, this Puck was a brown furry small toy-goat-like puppet, as vicious as he was cuddly, his enlarged eyes and child-like voice at times uncannily reminiscent of Gollum (of Tolkien's cinema saga). He delighted in getting things wrong, almost raped Hermia, used his magic to inebriate all the Mechanicals to the point of literally losing their heads; excited by this disturbing dance of floating heads and headless bodies – which threatened the individuals' identities – Puck proceeded to try the ass's head on each of the Mechanicals before finally settling it on Bottom's.

Throughout the performance, the fact that the humans behind the puppets were dressed in black (clothes and caps) enhanced the comedy of the situations and played with our perceptions. With only their hands (and occasionally faces) visible in the darkness of this production, the difference between puppet and puppeteer became blurred: was it the actors ventriloquizing the puppets or was it the puppets embodying the (audible but spectral) actors? The relationship between the heard and the seen – key in this Shakespeare play – was thus tested not only on the characters but also on the audience to this production. Identity, the other trademark of the play, was called into question: the individual puppeteer's voice was the only

way in which spectators could distinguish between the Athenians in the play; conversely, the individual puppeteers were acted out through the expressive physiognomies of the puppets, whose personalities were enhanced through the mobility of their mouths. Who was animating whom ran – metatheatrically – alongside who was manipulating whom in this Athens.

Having explored the darker issues of the plot in the woods, the production switched on the lights on the comedic finale. In its version of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, humans, gods and puppets interact in an ensemble that worked well together. Thisbe asked for a sword and said 'thank you' upon receiving it; then a human attendant held the sword point up and she spiked herself on it (this reminded one of us of some medieval representations of Thisbe's death). To dispel the lingering darkness of the play's pursuits, all broke into a jig to Pitbull's *Fireball* – puppets and puppeteers joining in as they broke the fourth-wall convention and took their bow to the delight of the audience who gladly joined in.

A Midsummer Night's Dream, an itinerant performance, directed by Philip Parr for the Craiova International Shakespeare Festival, Parrabola and Teatrulescu Company, Craiova, 28 April 2019.

Reviewed by: Nicoleta Cinpoes (University of Worcester), Lawrence Guntner (Technical University of Braunschweig) and Janice Valls-Russell (CNRS, University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3), with contributions from the panel.

‘A storyteller’: that is how Parrabbola, the brainchild of artistic director Philip Parr and writer, actor and researcher Brian Abbott, describes itself on the company’s website. Parrabbola’s agenda, as presented on the home page, is centred on working with communities in the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe who are ‘celebrating and developing confidence and self-expression’, regardless of age or background; ‘building shared values and a sense of place to create community identity’; and ‘looking to develop their own expressive voice and talents’. The *Midsummer Night’s Dream* that Parr directed for the Craiova International Shakespeare Festival in 2018, after *Romeo and Juliet* in 2016, certainly met all of those criteria. This was a site-specific, promenade production, designed and performed so that everyone in the audience can understand the action even if they have little or no experience of theatre and do not understand every word.

Even though the script was prepared beforehand, it was adapted during the rehearsals and the decision to perform in English and Romanian was taken with the actors, in accordance with linguistic skills, the ‘feel’ of a phrase or line in the original or in translation, and individual wishes and talents: thus the young man cast as Oberon turned out to be an exceptional singer, who felt more comfortable singing his lines than speaking them. Everyone who volunteered to participate was accepted. The eighty-strong cast included children, acting students, office employees, housewives, and retired people: everyone had a specific role, name and lines, so that each felt individually considered and involved, and not just a member of a crowd. This was clearly established from the outset, in the opening market scene, with its differentiated craftsmen, craftswomen, street performers and market-goers, with whom the audience mingled. Puck was performed by a ‘collective’ of actors, similarly dressed but with individualised features and actions even when they performed together.

Promenade performances cast new light on spaces. Audiences new to Craiova were led into areas of the city they ignored while residents discovered places they walked through every day without really taking notice. *Dream* moved from the carpark of Craiova’s university into its spacious and elegant hall, which served admirably for the court of Athens. Theseus, in

nineteenth-century formal imperial dress, came down the majestic staircase to welcome the English-speaking Hippolyta and her retinue of Amazons in Romanian, communicating with her through a translator – thereby giving the scene the diplomatic formality of an arranged wedding. He then turned his attention to Egeus, who approached him, with Hermia in tow, through the throng of Athenians – members of the cast and the audience. Everyone then moved down a main street through a small, tree-shaded square where fairies perched in the foliage, and from there through a garden overlooked by apartments where people could watch the mechanicals’ rehearsal below. A fountain in a pedestrianised street proved ideal for the quarrel between the lovers who splashed around as they lunged out at each other. On reaching a church, the show literally walked into a wedding – serendipity, in such cases, being a director’s best friend – before finishing on a street lined with bridal shops, where a long table with drinks awaited the whole wedding party – performers, spectators and passers-by. From there everyone walked a couple of hundred yards to a square lined with crowded cafés where a makeshift stage had been erected, with a painted backcloth, on the back of a lorry. Theseus, Hippolyta and the four lovers watched from a balcony over one of the cafés, throwing out loud mocking comments about the Moon and the other performers, to the irritation of those watching the play below who called to them to be quiet.

One of the challenges when performing in this kind of production is that there is no backstage where actors can withdraw, however briefly: they have to stay in character – and find ways of making it to the next location without stepping out of their roles. How do you do that when you fall asleep in a part of the woods that is in fact a lawn in front of an apartment building and wake up in another part of town? The problem was solved by having the lovers fall asleep in wheelbarrows; they were then wheeled to the next location and ‘parked’ in a courtyard until their next scene, just behind members of the audience who were watching another scene. Residents came and went, past the four actors who remained ‘asleep’ in their barrows.

The goal is also to promote spectatorship for audiences with little experience of theatre-going, accepting that for some experience may be partial, limited to just the one scene they may see in their part of town, from their apartment window or balcony, without necessarily following the whole show. Involvement was encouraged from the outset: in the market on the carpark, then in the crowd thronging in the university for the opening court scene, so that it seemed only natural that audience members should point out Demetrius to Helen as he hurried along the opposite pavement, that children should tell Hermia that Lysander had gone off with another girl, or that someone should call out ‘no te uccide!’ when Pyramus drew his sword. Indications of a show’s ‘success’ include whether there are more spectators at the end of the show than at the beginning and, as Parr puts it, whether there is a dog – someone out walking their dog who gets pulled into the audience and follows the show instead of returning home. By the end of the play, on that hot afternoon, the dogs, ice-cream eating children and adults were out in force, most of them gathered in one large circle of hand-holding dancers for the final jig while others cheered from the café terraces or sought out a corner in the shade.

Athens by Night [*Timon of Athens* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*], directed by Charles Chemin for the National Theatre, Amza Pellea Main Auditorium of Marin Sorescu National Theatre, Craiova, 1 May 2018.

Reviewed by: Nicoleta Cinpoș (University of Worcester), Charlène Cruxent (University Paul-Valéry, Montpellier 3), Nora Galland (University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3), Dana Monah (University of Iași) and Janice Valls-Russell (CNRS, University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3), with contributions from the panel.

Athens by Night, the production commissioned by the Festival and created by the French director Charles Chemin for the Craiova National Theatre, imagined *Dream* as an extension of *Timon*, taking the same ensemble to explore different facets of human interaction. In its revisiting of Shakespeare’s construction of Athens and its woods, the production’s journey backwards from the later tragedy to the earlier comedy also rewound the chronology of the two play’s translations into Romanian. The language of performance travelled from George Volceanov’s 2012 contemporary translation of *Timon of Athens*, part of the new *Complete Works* and hitherto unheard on a Romanian stage, to George Topârceanu’s 1921 translation of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a play that is as familiar to Romanian audiences, mainly in this poetic version, as *Timon of Athens* is unfamiliar: the play’s performance history in Romania is largely limited to two performances in the 1970s and another two in the 1990s.

The double bill plunged spectators into *Timon*’s universe of celebrity culture, social masquerade, consumerism and personal disintegration, leading them out again into what should have been the more reassuringly recognizable world of *Dream*. The playfulness around the mechanicals was there,

but the devastation experienced by Timon and Athens had left its mark. This was a barren, grey, lunar world. Nothing could grow in the defamiliarised woods. The twists and turns in the labyrinths of self-knowledge retained a darker side on this sunless side of the moon and the poetry of Topârceanu's translation clashed with the environment: seeing and listening created two, dichotomic experiences.

Chemin cut the two plays back for a performance that lasted three hours and twenty minutes, including intermission. Airing them jointly in this way was something none of the members of this reviewing panel had seen before. The design (by Adrian Damian) used the space imaginatively. The darkened wings were open to view. This expanded the depth and width of the performance space, and drew attention to the illusion of the action, as when the director helped an actor with his makeup. Continuity between the two Athens was established through a lighting design (Aliberto Sagretti) that explored a chromatic palette of nocturnal nuances to create an environment that enclosed the action in *Timon* and played on different layers of clarity in *Dream*. The design further engaged with ideas of entrapment and fluidity: a Perspex screen created distancing effects in *Timon*; fine-mesh netting partially obscured the view of the stage after the interval, materialising a threshold beyond which lay the world of fairies and magic in *Dream*.

As if challenging from within the production's play on distancing effects, characters broke through the fourth wall and overflowed into the foyer during the interval, interacting with an audience which responded on multiple levels, since it was composed of people who knew the company and the Festival well and others who were not in on all the jokes. Although Chemin was not a local director, his play on manipulation could be received as a metaphor of the social and political realities of today's Romania. The notion of instability and impermanence, with implications that went well beyond the frontiers of Romania, was further conveyed by the floor of the set, initially laid out with golden tiles which were stripped away to reveal sand or grey soil (clay beads, in fact) through which characters floundered; the language of the translation was as unforgiving and immediate in *Timon*. This suggested both a world built on instability, lacking foundations, and a gravitational pull which, in the first part of the play, threatened to bury illusions and self, and in the second, to prevent characters from taking off and living airy dreams.

The morphing of setting and characters from *Timon* into *Dream* gave the comedy a sinister ambiance: Theseus (Adrian Andone, who also played Apemantus) came across as an autocrat, in military uniform, with the dangerous bonhomie that goes with the job. After failing to orchestrate his own life, Timon (Claudiu Bleonț) went on to play Quince who at one point had a rant on the microphone about wanting to play Timon. Servant to Oberon after being

Timon's steward Flavius, Puck (George Albert Costea) was a frustrated stage manager, calling for lights, trying to organise matters, rather like a rival of Quince – some of his jokes harked back to previous editions of the Festival.

Timon's Athens was a world of satin gowns, Italianate elegance and golden floors. Upstage stood a long banquet table that also served as a catwalk for characters who struck isolated poses, like models being photographed for a glossy magazine. This was a world of parading individuals, of banking, with assets piled high, in the form of presents wrapped in golden gift paper – a world which we viewed from afar as if gazing into a rich home through an immense bay window. As the play progressed, the design materialised the stripping of assets: the glow and colours of the earlier scenes were snuffed out; a slanting shaft of light lit up a senatorial figure dressed in red, one of the creditors, while two others, bailiff-like, dismantled the floor until Timon was left stranded on a single panel. The illusion of munificence shrank back to a tomb-like space as Timon, trudging in the heavy

soil, was forced into it, trapped between the upstage neon screen that advanced and the downstage Perspex screen that moved back.

The slow, choreographed acting style created a distanced relationship with this old play which the audience (re)discovered in a very new version. The uneasiness was compounded by a blurring between theatre and 'real life' as well as a blurring of literary references. When Timon stepped out of the play to invite a female spectator to join him on stage, a woman stood up. Audience expectations of comic relief abruptly changed gear when Timon insulted her, calling her 'a whore'. She stormed off, saying she had paid to see a play and had dressed up for the occasion. As she left the auditorium, she yelled '#metoo'. We later saw her on stage again, resuming the role of a dissatisfied spectator. In another extra-textual intrusion, the Senator, who had come across as a tyrant-like figure, stepped forward to read Heiner Müller's *Ajax, for instance* (1994–95), a poem in which Ajax muses over the irrelevance of heroes and the death of tragedy, viewing the twentieth century through the prism of ancient myths and history. This disruption invited the spectators to associate Müller's disillusioned protagonist with Shakespeare's – and Chemin's – Timon, while at the same time drawing attention to the function of intersecting narratives and open-ended borrowings in contemporary performance. This in turn reconnected with Apemantus in the position of *raisonneur* at the beginning of the play, addressing the audience from a front-stage microphone.

Timon ended abruptly with a loud gunshot and a messenger falling down as the lights went out. The audience started clapping. When the lights came on again, two people stepped out of the audience voicing their appreciation. They proved to be Hippolyta (Monica Ardeleanu) and Theseus: this was a play staged for them, turning *Timon* into a play-within-the-play, on a par with the mechanicals' version of *Pyramus and Thisbe* (Quince later announced that the mechanicals would be performing the tragedy of an Athenian, which reflected contemporary society). The messenger who had dropped dead at the end of *Timon* promptly stood up to start performing *Lysander* (Cătălin Vieru).

The audience trooped out of the auditorium after Theseus and Hippolyta for the interval – this was also choreographed so that actors and spectators were cast in a wider performance. Progressively, the crowd in the foyer drifted towards a raised, dais-like area, which had been used by officials for the opening of the Festival. On the dais was a large bed on which Theseus stood, hearing the lovers' cases. As members of the audience edged forward, they were constantly interrupted by men asking for directions to the toilets – those, of course, were the mechanicals, one of whom had already drifted around the foyer before *Timon*, asking people in Romanian and English if they had seen his dog. Finally, the mechanicals jumped onto the bed taking selfies, while Helena – outside, on the theatre balcony – could be heard as a voice over, talking about love to Hermia and Lysander, inviting comments from the mechanicals: 'what a super text'.

The actors then led the spectators back to the auditorium, where they found a lunar stage with rocks, behind a mesh screen that partially veiled a bright crescent moon. This grew to a full moon by the end of the play, extending the three days and three nights into a lunar month. Once on stage, the actors floundered in the soil of clay beads, their movements belying the airiness usually associated with fairies. In contrast with the first half of the performance, though, and in keeping with the generic switch, the acting was very physical, with assertive body language, as when Helena pushed Demetrius to the ground and in the later fights between the lovers, with mutual hitting, kicking and attempted strangling. Moments of grace invited themselves onto the stage as when Oberon, after casting the spell on Titania, lovingly stroked her head, taking no notice of Hermia and Lysander who entered in a playful mood. Titania lay asleep front stage throughout the remaining scenes until she awoke.

Popular language, invective, references (to the Americans landing on the moon) and jokes (one on Coca-Cola) lent the play a more contemporary tonality that complemented the poetic style of the translation and raised laughs, mainly with the Romanian members of the audience. Acting as Chemin's mouthpiece, Bottom, who was renamed Funduleț (the Romanian for little botty) and performed by a female actor of no mean size (Raluca Păun), announced that the mechanicals' 'comedia tragica' would be 'living' rather than Stanilavskian theatre. Props included a hand shower and a coat hanger. Audience members were brought onto the stage to serve as a wall. The mechanicals also asked spectators seated down the centre of the auditorium to stand up and hold hands in order to create a wall that partitioned the audience between a Pyramus team and a Thisbe team – as if materialising the hostility between their two houses and assuming that all communities, including audiences, were bound to experience division? By the end of the performance, the moon was full and the spectators were invited to travel to the world of *Dream*, or to believe that they were a part of it, by playing with huge moon- or planet-like balloons which were sent into the auditorium and floated over their heads.

Speaking with some panel members after the performance, Chemin explained that he had wanted to play with the patience of the audience, and on their nerves, taking them through the dark story of *Timon of Athens* to involve them in the world of *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*. *Athens by Night* sought to draw everyone – actors and spectators – into the theatrical illusion, even while actively challenging it, as when one of the lovers declared on awakening, unaware of Oberon and Titania's presence on stage, 'I will never believe in fairies'.

Shylock, written by Gareth Armstrong and translated by Marian Popescu, adapted and directed by Horațiu Mălăele for Teatrul de Comedie (Bucharest), Colibri Theatre for Children and Young Adults, Craiova, 2 May 2018.

Reviewed by: Christie Carson (Royal Holloway University), Nicoleta Cinpoes (University of Worcester) and Guillaume Foulquie (University of Worcester), with contributions from the panel.

In Horațiu Mălăele's directorial take, Gareth Armstrong's 1999 *Shylock* was not a one-man show but a play for eight actors and a disembodied voice, and as such harked back more to its source, *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare's only too familiar play to international and Romanian audiences alike. Its adaptation status – as 'repetition without replication' (to borrow Hutcheon's definition) – was overt. It announced itself as '*Shylock after Armstrong*' (Marian Popescu's translation); its synopsis advertised 'a show that proposes a journey into the history of Jewishness and anti-Semitism, a sad history of intolerance, hatred and ample suffering, told with a bitter smile by Tubal, the only friend Shakespeare gives to the Jew in *The Merchant of Venice*'; the logo of the Bucharest City Hall/Mayor's Office on the programme cover hinted at

the production's educational stance (and anti-discrimination agenda) – ripe stuff for Colibri, Craiova's venue for children and youth theatre. With Tubal as the guide, 'this fascinating journey into an old and absurd world whose truth still haunts us' (Festival Programme) compressed Armstrong's script into seventy intense minutes (no interval) in which a lot of the historical commentary was delivered visually (by video designer Dilmana Yordanova) while Shylock's English stage history was relegated to the Programme Notes.

The performance started, as in Armstrong's, with a reminder of the pound of flesh, and a man (George Mihăiță) alone on stage saying 'Shylock! I am Shylock!' and delivering Shakespeare's character's speech – 'Tis mine and I will have it. / If you deny me, fie upon your law' – in which

Shylock explains his reasoning as a challenge to the fundamentally racist and segregationist institutions of Venice. Cued by Armstrong's stage directions, 'light brighten[ed] as the figure turn[ed] to address the audience' no longer as Shylock but as Tubal, he explained or, rather, the *actor* playing Tubal. This retreat from the centre of the action invited the audience to take a necessary critical step back as Tubal proceeded to explain Shakespeare's creative process, his sources, his imagination completing and/or editing existing narratives. In this production, Armstrong's lesson in the history of Jews in Europe from the Roman Empire to the Renaissance was short but poignant, vividly illustrated with video projections and with an added dose of Romanian history of anti-Semitism for good measure. The history of the badge was explored, with the Papal decision compared to a 'European directive', and the very name of Pope Innocent III presented as ironical; two fleeting images in the fast-paced commentary would haunt the production: the yellow pointed hat and the ghetto boxes, key identifiers of Jewishness and anti-Semitic stances.

The design of the production (by Iuliana Vîlsan) helped to support the vision of a black and white world of right and wrong, inside or outside Venetian society. The clown-like costumes reflected the Commedia dell'arte theatrical tradition but also suggested a world of stereotypes and visual humour. The masks worn by the Venetian characters resembled both the enduring image of the Venice Carnival and the heads of birds with elongated fierce black beaks, ideally suited to pecking their prey. Shylock and Tubal stood out from the extravagant and wasteful Christians because of the plainness of their costumes but also because of the natural tones of their voices and their everyday demeanour. The earnestness of the central, older characters acted as a comment on the exuberant youngsters. This sense of a new world of wealth and excess seemed to be a comment that was directed at the new theatre tradition as well as the audience. Tubal, at one point, descended into the audience to speak directly to several people in the front row. When the actor began to struggle with this forced interaction, he blamed the director who, he said, 'thought it was a good idea'. The scene on stage and off seemed to reflect a rapidly changing cultural world that those in the audience could easily recognise.

On his first entrance, Shylock (Horațiu Mălăele) had a comic, stereotypical exchange with Tubal. His accent, gestures, demeanour embodied Tubal's earlier remark on the role's history: 'this is what was required of a stage Jew: comedy and villainy'; the fact that the audience laughed only confirmed that old habits die hard. Old and new – worlds, views, acting styles – were pitched against each other. The Christian characters provided a sense of contemporaneity: Antonio (Bogdan Mălăele) was king of bling, a flamboyant gangster of poor taste, dressed in fur adorned with gold chains; all the others' masks supplied an anonymity reminiscent of the impunity of internet bullying and trolling. After their onstage violence against Shylock, whom the young Christians pushed to the ground and kicked, Tubal returned to unpack the scene as one in a long lineage of Jewish stereotyping. He introduced the audience to Christopher Marlowe's Barabbas, the Jew of Malta, as a theatrical monster the dramatist knew would attract crowds, and proceeded to perform Barabbas briefly only to point out the absurdity of the character.

The first sighting of Jessica (Ruxanda Grecu) was of a young woman locked inside a glass box the size of a small room, jam-packed with belongings. The crowded space, a reference to the low-ceiling apartments of the Venice ghetto, (re)presented Jessica's sense of imprisonment – misdirected at her father rather than the ghetto as an institution. Her elopement only led to her moving into another glass box, with Lorenzo (Lucian Ionescu). That he was dexterously counting (aloud!) the notes stolen from Shylock *while* making love to Jessica clearly showed his priorities. Shylock's reaction on his return home to discover his daughter's elopement followed Armstrong's playscript (not Shakespeare's): instead of prioritising the importance of his ducats and jewels over his daughter, the

two losses were separated and inspired different emotions. He was sad about Jessica, and angry about the theft, but more importantly the play's ambiguity was removed: Jessica was not to blame, and the theft was entirely attributed to the Christian characters – Shylock saw it all, Tubal explained, as 'Bassanio's conspiracy' against him.

The 'Hath not a Jew eyes' speech (the opening of Act 2 in Armstrong) also marked a shift in this production: in terms of depth of introspections and plot delivery, both touching on Brechtian conventions in the quick succession of cameos. Shylock performed his speech in front of a broken mirror – a metaphor for a fractured sense of self as a result of racist abuse. By this point Shylock had lost everything: he was no longer a father, his daughter had rejected their religion and defrauded him, so where was he supposed to find his identity? In the trial scene, the Duke's disembodied voice (voice over Constantin Codrescu) addressed the audience from large speakers at the back of the auditorium, creating the impression of an unattainable authority, impossible to challenge, change or question. Tubal's comment 'is that partial or what?' (disambiguated in Romanian by using both 'partial' and 'racism') pointed out that the Duke's first words towards the Jew were racist, and stressed further the corruption of Venetian justice. When Shylock changed his mind and asked for the money, Portia (Mirela Zeța) laughed cunningly; when Shylock kneeled for the Duke's mercy, Tubal repeated Portia's mercy speech, which stressed the double standards of this justice, the hypocrisy of the Christian characters.

In the production's ending, the last possible ambiguity of the text (both Shakespeare's and Armstrong's) was removed. Shylock's words 'I am content' were spliced together with his 'Please let me go, I am not well'; and when delivered as one line, emphasised the exact opposite. In an attempt to reveal the awkward difference between the endings of Acts 4 and 5 in Shakespeare's play, *Shylock's* ending, rewritten as his emigration from Italy, was delivered simultaneously to the happy ending of the Christian characters, creating a blatant contrast. Their dancing and singing in Belmont (stage fore) left Shylock seated, surrounded by his belongings, almost blocked him from view. This contrast was also evident in the simultaneous use of a happy, classical tune for the Christians' dance, and a violin playing a melancholy Jewish tune. Once again, height as well as colour marked out who the winners and losers were in this biting monochrome world. The sincerity of the central character was made more dramatic and effecting when contrasted by the meanness and frivolity that surrounded him.

In a final departure from Armstrong's monologue, the scene gave no words to either Shylock or Tubal. The lights faded, and the audience started to clap; when the lights returned, the Christian characters, now the actors bowing down at the front of the stage, revealed the tableau of Shylock's emigration starkly. This amplified further the disparity, to the point of forcing the audience to clap while Shylock was still suffering. This was a Shylock for our times, and the laughter that greeted the performance was laced with irony and sadness. The uncomfortable paradox also anchored the story in a historical materiality which survived the fall of the curtain and worked to keep the audience aware of the reality of discrimination and hate. The production achieved an impressively beautiful combination of empathy for Shylock and awareness of the mechanisms of social injustice which Shylock fell victim to. By assuming the role of a commentator, knowing the historical context of the narrative and its writing, Tubal

became an agent of disambiguation of the play, a necessary exercise for such a problematic topic. Through his comments, the systematic nature of prejudice emerged, with the hypocrisy of the Christian characters and of the laws of Venice highlighting the institutional dimension of hate.

Hamlet, collectively directed and performed by Alina Berzunțeanu, Richard Bovnoczki and Peter Kerek for 'unteatru' (Bucharest), I. D. Sîrbu Studio of Marin Sorescu National Theatre, Craiova, 3 May 2018.

Reviewed by: Christie Carson (Royal Holloway University), Nicoleta Cinpoș (University of Worcester) and Guillaume Foulquie (University of Worcester), with contributions from the panel.

Working with just three actors, two men and one woman, in a collectively devised performance delivered in the round in the black box I. D. Sîrbu Studio of the Craiova National Theatre, this *Hamlet* put before its audience a meditation on a play that has meant many things to Romanian audiences. The most translated of Shakespeare's plays into Romanian, *Hamlet* has a long history of political dissidence, of stellar casts and a strong directorial (male) lineage. For unteatru (literally 'a theatre'), an independent company that sees itself as a 'host theatre' which aims to provide young artists with an alternative creative space to the 'impenetrable state theatre system' and audiences alternative participatory experiences in the resulting 'cultural showcases', *Hamlet* became 'a state of mind' (Festival Programme Notes).

This radically reduced version of the play (running at fifty minutes with no interval) eliminated many of its characters: there was no Horatio, no Laertes; Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Fortinbras and the Ghost did not appear. It did away with props and costume change, and more importantly, with plot linearity and character individuality. Key to this approach were not (just) the customary textual cuts, line splicing and doubling, but the versatile ventriloquizing of the core issues in *Hamlet* – which were not surveillance, secrecy or celebrity, the staple of most staged *Hamlets* elsewhere. State politics out of the way (the production began at 1.2 and saw no army returning to claim 'rights of memory'), the focus of this three-person, barely one-hour essay on the play was squarely on the triangular inter-generational and inter-gender relationships. The three actors achieved this sometimes through morphing from one character into another, sometimes through partaking in soliloquies, chorus-like, sometimes through a cacophony of competing views.

The 'visitors' (as the company prefers to see its audiences) entered the black box to find the three-strong cast – dressed in black and barefoot – on a raised circle that made up the stage space: one woman kneeling, two men standing. The performance began with each actor sending their energy into the audience through a simultaneous tossing motion and foot stamping on the hollow raised stage. Once the audience settled, the music stopped, the woman stood up and joined the older man in performing the mourning words of Claudius and Gertrude from 1.2; the other man – Hamlet? – performed the 'To be or not to be' speech (3.1) simultaneously, the three cutting in and out of each other's speech. He followed it with 'O that this too too solid flesh would melt' (1.2), whose accusatory lines directed at Gertrude and joined by Claudius (or was he the Ghost come to chide his wife?) reduced the woman to tears, makeup streaming down her face. Hamlet's violent gestures during this first scene, as if angrily throwing a ball against an invisible wall, stressed the depth of Claudius and Gertrude's inability to understand him – and the scene once again stressed the woman's precarious position: trapped in these conflictual dynamics.

The surprising and direct interaction with the audience, right from the start of the play, made it clear that there were expectations of the viewers. With the audience on four sides, no one watching had the same perspective. This physical manifestation of the premise of the performance forced an instant realignment of the actor-audience contract. The argument of the play would be read differently depending on the positioning of the spectator physically but also in terms of their gender, age and cultural background. This was to be a *Hamlet* for an international, educated audience that knew not only Shakespeare's text but also its many manifestations and manipulations, and was

willing to partake not so much in the textual Lego for connoisseurs *but* in the physical triangulation intensified further by the round stage just over two meters in diameter.

The physicality of the actors formed a key element of the interpretation since lines were often shared, reassigned or ventriloquised. The parts of Ophelia and Gertrude were both played by the one woman on stage, dressed in a black and white school girl dress which was crowned by bleach blond hair. The current obsession with remaining young but also the long tradition of casting inappropriately aged actresses as Hamlet's mother were both highlighted. Hamlet was played by a red-haired man of similar age, pointing out the trend for older actors to play this role and a tendency to see the play as a process of self-discovery for an arrested adolescent. Claudius was played by the only actor to look his age, with grey hair and a beard but also a strong physical presence, tinged with a hint of menace. With all three performers often stomping loudly on the raised wooden O, and even Polonius using sign language with Ophelia, the actors' bodies became the characters' prominent mode of emotional and psychological expression of fear, pain, anger and desire. This radical embodiment of the characters' inner experience was made more explicit in Priam's slaughter (2.2), which was not merely told, but fully performed: Pyrrhus and Priam were embodied silently by the two men *as* the woman narrated their story. After Pyrrhus killed Priam (with heavy slaps on the neck), the woman became Hecuba and Pyrrhus took over as narrator. 'Oh what a rogue and peasant slave am I!' (2.2) followed not as Hamlet's speech, but as a common reflection on affect and empathy in which all three actors and characters had a share (in an interesting allocation of lines, some individual, others choric).

While transitions from one scene to the next were made clear by the actors' changing positions on the stage, sometimes it was only the audience's recognition of familiar words that cued the identification of the scenes and the characters' reincarnations. This contributed to a sense that the performance was either for an audience familiar with *Hamlet* or that the plot itself was less important than the staging of family relations. In some cases, textual recognition was reliable as it dispelled ambiguity; in others, it only perpetuated it and as a result intensified the discomfort at what was being performed. Scene after scene, the gendered casting – almost surprising for a three-actor experimental performance – seemed to criticise patriarchal family structures. After the first scene and the first role transition, Hamlet became Polonius while Gertrude became Ophelia, and Polonius slapped his daughter's behind, bringing incest into the themes the production explored; later, when entering to tell the royal couple about Hamlet's "madness", Polonius found them sexually engaged. In the closet scene, dead Polonius served Hamlet's speech both as Claudius, the 'king of shreds and patches' (3.4) and as the Ghost come not to 'chide' his son but to rape Gertrude – an uncanny enactment of Hamlet's sexualised vision of 'the incestuous bed' made all the more disturbing by Gertrude's denial that she perceived anything. The physical violence was enhanced but revealed to the audience with a sense of secrecy more than privacy. Throughout the performance, the violence, at times sexual, staged in a small and confined space, expressed the troubled desires occurring within a dysfunctional family – whether Hamlet's or Ophelia's.

This spare and bare production used no props, so when Hamlet asked his mother to look at the picture of his father, he indicated his own face; when Ophelia gave away flowers they

were kisses. Her final madness scene (4.5) was a textual 'document in madness! Thoughts and remembrance fitted' in a collage of snippets from the play: 'to be or not to be', 'how should I your true-love know?', 'are you fair?', 'I loved you not', 'to sleep, to sleep, to die', 'like a camel', 'I was honest', 'a piece of flesh', 'tragedy, comedy, historical', 'kissed me at the window', 'where is my father?', 'where is Hamlet?'. Continuing, as Gertrude (?), with 'Ophelia has drowned' – addressed to Hamlet (not Laertes) – this production clearly disambiguated the suicide.

This mixing of lines, characters, positions and perspectives created a central family picture that was deeply entwined and troubling. This clear focus was not without issues for spectators caught in character identification dilemmas: did Hamlet turn into Polonius or has Claudius just become Ophelia's abusive father? Or as in the final scene, in which – given Laertes's absence – was it Claudius that Hamlet had to fight till death? When the three characters eventually die on stage, this intermingling is complete: this twisted family (or was it two families?) cannot live together or apart. Down to its last image, of Gertrude crucified and Hamlet fallen on her lap (both a pieta and the missing scene of Hamlet lying in Ophelia's lap before the dumb show), this production was a powerful statement about the psychology of this master text and international audiences' obsession with it.
