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The Craiova Shakespeare Festival 2016 and a Valediction for Yukio Ninagawa

A report by Maria Shevtsova on the 2016 edition of the biennial Craiova International Shakespeare Festival, continuing her coverage of the event in *NTQ* 112. She pays special attention here to the *pièce de résistance* of the latest festival – *Richard II* with the Saitama Arts Theatre, directed by Yukio Ninagawa, whose death occurred barely a month later: this article is also a tribute to a world-renowned man of the theatre. Maria Shevtsova is co-editor of *New Theatre Quarterly* and Professor of Drama and Theatre Arts in the Department of Theatre and Performance, Goldsmiths, University of London.

Key terms: Emil Boroghina, *Romeo and Juliet*, Saitama Arts Theatre, *Richard II*.

THE PROGRAMME of the 2016 edition of the biennial Craiova International Shakespeare Festival reflected the aims and outlook of the preceding editions, as shaped by its founder, curator, and permanent organizer Emil Boroghina (see *NTQ* 112, 2012, p. 352–62). But the budget for this festival on the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death was particularly tightly screwed, to Boroghina's great disappointment and contrary to his plans. He consequently wisely chose to engage more solo and similarly lower-cost and small-scale shows than usual. Several mid-scale works, while not necessarily providing financial savings, also appeared to shift the balance slightly away from the 'great director' vistas of the festival in the past.

The solo and small-scale group of performances included Poland's Piotr Kondrati's *Seven Clowns* and Sweden's SthimsMusik Teater's *William: the One-Man Musical with a String Quartet about William Shakespeare* – its quasi–burlesque title more or less preparing audiences for a none-too-serious evening out. A solo *Macbeth Badya* from Kalkota directed by Manish Mitra and performed by Raju Bera was in twelve scenes whose titles and contents were announced by Mitra's voice off, in the dark, as part of the production. They cogently narrated Macbeth's story from his birth (a baby loved by his mother) and pivotal meeting with the witches to his demise through his thirst for 'war to die, die to war' and 'power, more power – power'.

Mitra's gloss on the play, scene by scene, thus reveals both his own political emphasis and how he turns it to point to the world today. This is dance theatre, combining elements of Kathak and Bharatanatyam with touches of indeterminate contemporary idioms in which Bera's highly expressive performance is nothing if not expressionistic in the manner of early twentieth-century expressionist dance.

Such productions were frequently shown in student performance spaces or in large hallways of the University of Craiova, as was also the case of one or two other dance pieces and a would-be provocative, mildly pornographic *King Lear* performed by the University's Department of the Arts. Boroghina's extension of this edition into university venues suggests the festival's even more than usual embrace of young spectators. So, too, does his choice of outdoor spaces, which widened audiences to include non-theatre-going people about their daily business, as well as families with children.

Romania's Gong Theatre from Sibiu, directed by Alina Hiristea, played *The Tempest* with fine, string-manipulated metallic puppets in a public square: Prospero was cast as Shakespeare, in the silhouette of his most famous portrait. The Worcester Repertory Company performed *The Comedy of Errors* in yelled dialogue, over-excessive gesticulation and forced jollity in the square in front of the National Theatre of Craiova, the festival's

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traditional main-house stage. The perennial dangers of street theatre were here heightened by something like a schoolboy view of what could please an ambulatory crowd.

Altogether different was the energetic K'antu Ensemble from Britain in its Renaissance music concert, which was also given in a public square, mixing Elizabethan songs, some of which were familiar from Shakespeare's plays, with others of the same period, notably from Spain, rather less so. This delightful ensemble had performed to festival guests several days earlier at Port Cetate, which every two years on the occasion of the Shakespeare festival hosts a magnificent dinner in its honour. Run by Mircea Dinescu, a highly celebrated Romanian poet, and his translator wife, Cetate was conceived as a cultural centre that could also serve as a retreat for the weary in idyllic surroundings. K'antu Ensemble sang to a glorious sun setting on the Danube on whose other side was Bulgaria. *Twelfth Night*, say, would not have gone amiss in this outdoor context.

Alas, poor critic, three other British companies arrived after I needed to leave: Flute Theatre, directed by Kelly Hunter, with *Hamlet, Who's There?*; Shakespeare at the Tobacco Factory, directed by Andrew Hilton, with *Hamlet;* and Parrabbola, directed by Phillip Paar, with *Romeo and Juliet*, in collaboration with the Romanian Teatrulescu Company.

Among the mid-scale companies, *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, billed by the South African Abrahamse and Meyer Productions, is best not discussed. *The Winter's Tale*, presented by the SFUMATO Theatre Laboratory, directed by Margarita Mladenova, this Bulgarian company's well known founding director, made much of the play's comic scenes. But its rural folk were doltish rather than funny, and its royalty, although intended to exploit jokes and gags through nutty costumes, headgear, and footwear, seemed merely exaggerated. The scenes of mystery and magic did not quite hit the mark, starting with Leontes's inexplicable jealousy and ending with Hermione's return to life. They were fundamentally in a single tone, so blurring the emotional nuances that accrue in and through them. The result was not so much a cold as an unfulfilled production whose central design feature, a movable white-tiled wall, failed to excite the imagination, despite its various geometric configurations, which signalled changes of time, place, and event.

The mid-scale work that captured attention was the Israeli Beer-Sheva Theatre's *Romeo and Juliet,* directed by Irad Rubinstain, which was cheered, stomped, and whistled to success by its predominantly young audience. It may well be that the production's young spectators saw in 'these stupid adults' on the stage (quoting one of them) the image of comparable adults in their everyday lives. Some may have glimpsed in the warring Montagues and Capulets the scourge of current conflicts. The young Israeli actors must have associated the story of Romeo and Juliet with indefensible parents of this kind, to go by their exuberant performances of youthful faith and hope in the face of adult intransigence.

The fact that Juliet's mother is a clichéd middle-class woman out of this or that television serial drives home the production's criticism of one generation's betrayal of another. Ostentatiously dressed to be forever young, she swills alcohol from a flask or a bottle, is dissatisfied with her husband, and makes a pass at Paris on the eve of his marriage to Juliet, which Paris does not resist. So much for the mum. So much for the aspirant spouse, son of the establishment. Then there is Juliet's father. He might be a hawk, but he is feckless at home. His lamentations on his daughter's death hint that he might have a heart – and possibly sense – after all.

Yet perhaps the most captivating features for young spectators, and those in which they most saw themselves, were the semiotics of youth culture: Juliet's short outfits worn in layers with black tights full of holes; the torn jeans, leather or tight fabric jackets, and trainers or boots of the swaggering Montagues and Capulets; wheels held up to revving sounds that indicate Romeo and Mercutio are on motorbikes; street fights, vaulting over fences, sliding down poles and Romeo's jumping on to balconies among

other testosterone feats that conjure up a 'hard' macho environment. The whole is (over) simplified, but vivid and fully recognizable, as are the sweet love and grief expressed deftly by the young woman in the part.

Large-scale local 'showcase' works were *Julius Caesar* from the National Theatre 'Marin Sorescu' of Craiova and its guest director Peter Schneider, and *Romeo and Juliet* performed by the National Theatre 'Radu Stanca' from Sibiu, directed by Bucharest-trained Bogdan Sărătean (not seen). Schneider is a North American, a maker of animated and live-action films whose technological skills were impressive but did not couple well with the dramatic action. There were fundamentally no actors in this production, although they spoke, moved, and reacted, occasionally trying to do so with feeling. Rudderless, they showed up what was lacking in this normally strong acting ensemble.

From international stages came Thomas Ostermeier's highly acclaimed *Richard III,* premiered in 2015 at the Schaubühne in Berlin, and an installation version of Romeo Castellucci's 1997 production of *Julius Caesar* with his Societas Raffaello Sanzi (both after my departure). Luk Perceval's *Macbeth* with the Baltic House Theatre of St Petersburg, which I had seen before on two different occasions (*NTQ* 120, 2014), was, once again, a knockout. In the meantime, Luk Perceval had narrowed the production's visual field by concentrating the uninterrupted dance-like movements of the witches on the gently swinging metal pipes that were the design of the entire staging. Previously, the witches' movements had extended below these sightlines to the floor. Perceval thus cleared the space for the eye to focus on the protagonists' moral-psychological hell, which was the production's central concern.

The *pièce de résistance* of the festival was *Richard II* with the Saitama Arts Theatre, directed by Yukio Ninagawa. Ninagawa died on 12 May at the age of eighty, shortly after his troupe returned to Japan. While he counts of course as a major director of Shakespeare's plays, having mounted some seventeen of them, his personal goal was to direct the full canon at least once – he had directed *Hamlet* eight times, and had been rehearsing *Measure for Measure*, which was premiered two weeks after his death. Boroghina's dream for more than a decade was to bring a Ninagawa production to Craiova, and here it was, finally. What follows is to be taken as *NTQ*'s tribute, not solely to an exceptional Japanese director, but to an exceptional man of world theatre.

Richard II was performed by sixty actors, thirty of whom were the young troupe, tellingly called the 'Saitama Next Theatre', while the other thirty made up the 'Saitama Gold Theatre', which gathers together older actors – some in their eighties who had retired and were back on the stage again; several were non-actors. The average age of this elderly group was seventy-seven; of the younger ones, thirty-seven.

Ninagawa's main image is not so much the mixture of generations as marked in Shakespeare, nor even the sheer power of numbers in the playing space. It is the image of where these elders are – in wheelchairs, which they wheel in *en masse* for the opening scene to the rush of their sound and hum of a gathering offstage. At other times some of them are wheeled in by rather frail-looking women, others by members of the younger cast, who subsequently assume their roles of Bolingbroke, Mowbray, Aumerle, and so on, in situ. Economy of this kind means fewer exits and entrances to distract attention away from the central action.

The older male figures play their parts from their wheelchairs throughout the performance, creating a fascinating blend of occasional old-man peevishness – one of the sources of humour within the production – and strength of character within impaired bodies full of the knowledge of power: York is an especially potent example. In this way, Ninagawa, whose work has always been renowned for its beautiful and eloquent visual imagery, intimates how the attraction of power endures, as does the desire to grasp and clutch on to it.

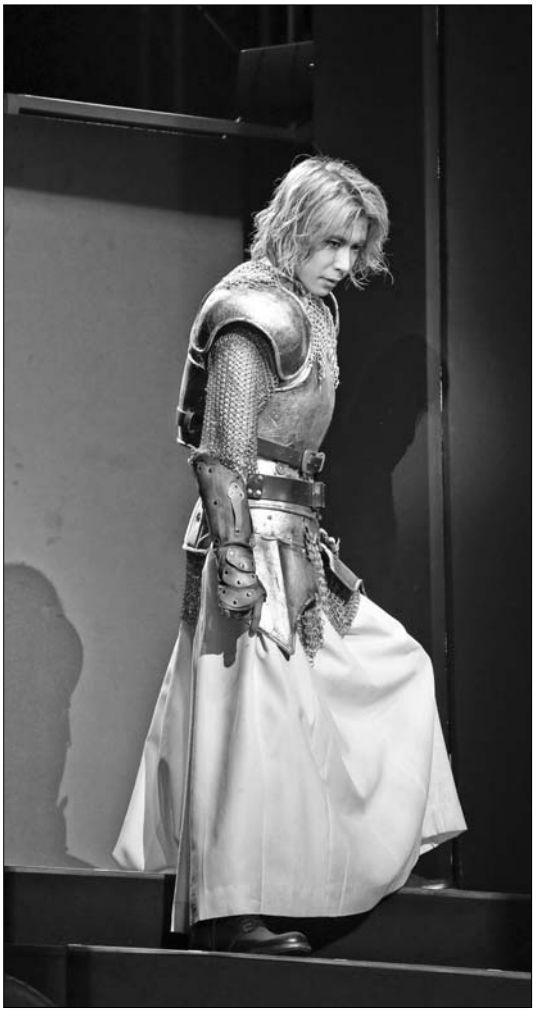
A very similar image of power emerges from the battle between the younger men, Richard and Bolingbroke, with its attendant complexities of rightful kingship and usurp-

Above: Yukio Ninagawa (1935–2016), director of the *pièce de résistance* of the festival, *Richard II*, with the Saitama Arts Theatre.

ation. It is significant that Richard enters in a wheelchair, which represents his throne, and from which, unlike the elderly men, he rises, albeit unwillingly, to action. It is from this same chair-throne, a symbol of the disabling force of political power, that Bolingbroke springs into action. The difference in their movement – Richard's is languid, Bolingbroke's all energy – signals what, in metaphorical terms, is a struggle between light and fire, between something like spiritual enlightenment and earthly force.

Nowhere is this contrast more vividly accentuated than when Richard appears at the top of stairs in white robes and metallic armour covering his chest, which glistens in the bright light on him. The actor Kenshi Uchida is slight and pale, with bleached hair. Sword in hand, he stands his ground, like an avenging angel. Hayata Tateyama as Bolingbroke below him is squat, dark, and imperious, and he brings enormous emotional weight to the role from the beginning of the performance to its end.

The quality of the acting in the production, in all its stylized theatricality, is one of Ninagawa's greatest achievements – greater, indeed, than the cross-cultural/intercultural blending of 'East and West' for which he has



Kenshi Uchida as Richard. Photo: Maiko Miyagawa.

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This page: the opening scene of *Richard II*. Above: the elders wheel in *en masse*. Below: the opening tango. Opposite page: Richard and Bolingbroke (Hayata Tateyama) tango. Photos: Maiko Miyagawa.

been lauded in Europe. In *Richard II*, elements such as the samurai skirts and tops of Western armour that Bolingbroke and his supporters wear can be taken as cross-cultural, as can the anachronistic chimes of Big Ben, for example, or the phrases of piano music from Beethoven interspersing the cadences of spoken Japanese. All this has an effect, but would have less impact without the actors' fine work.

Ninagawa does not simply focus on the drama to be had from the counterpoint between Richard and Bolingbroke. He concentrates, as well, on the continuity of the struggle

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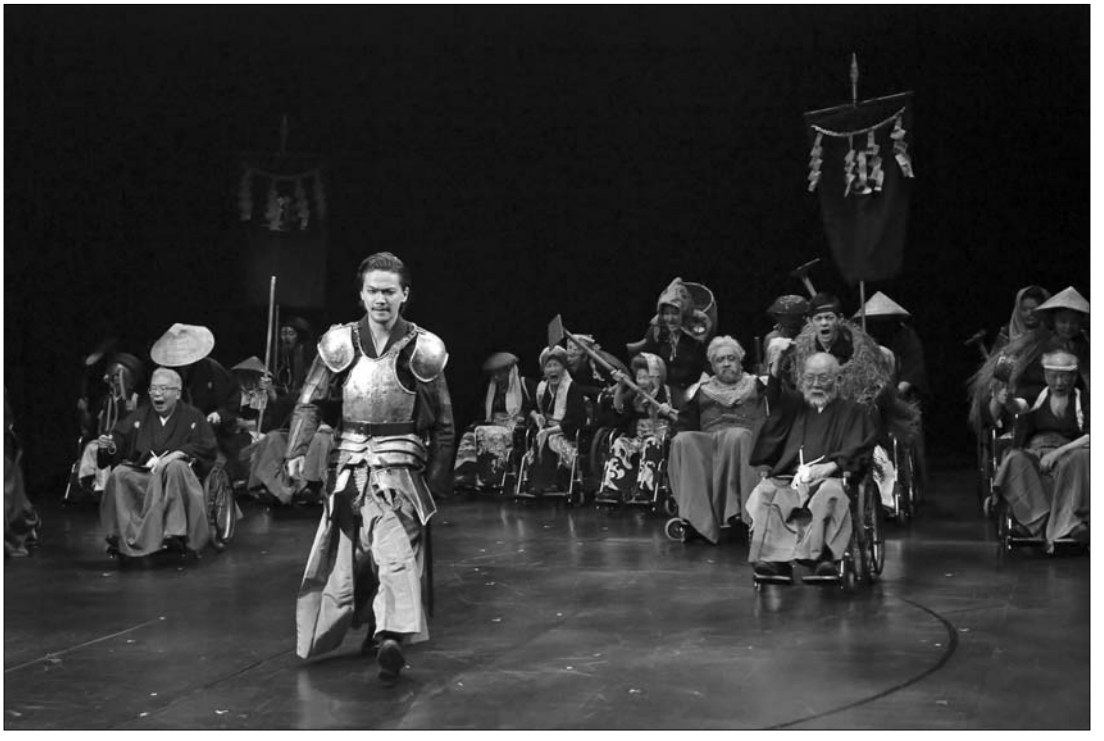

Bolingbroke at war, backed by the common people. Photo: Maiko Miyagawa.

for power, which links Richard to Bolingbroke as it links their generation to that of their fathers. The idea of continuity is conveyed through mirror imaging – literally, when Richard looks at himself in a mirror and the light caught in it is refracted across the stage. It recurs when Richard tentatively proffers his crown to Bolingbroke, who, just as tentatively, stretches his hand, only to snatch it decisively in one sharp gesture.

Watching such scenes are the elders seated in their wheelchairs up against the spectators on either side of the playing space, with their carers behind them. Since these couples are present more often than not, they become witnesses of the historical events played out before them. They are courtiers and common people, as different scenes require. When the latter, they brandish pitchforks and spades as they surge forward for war.

And they dance the tango in the production's first and last scenes. The end mirrors the beginning in the only two moments when the disabled become able-bodied, suggesting the continuum of the one with the other. Youth partners age, which is integral to the same continuum. Bolingbroke, when he is king, tangos with the youthful Aumerle in a burning repetition of Richard's tango with Bolingbroke earlier. These homoerotic images are ambiguous, although they may imply both the seductive call of power and the pull of seduction as such. What is perfectly clear is that the tango is a dance of life.

No production ever gives away its secrets at face value. The 'secret' behind the production is that Ninagawa was himself obliged to take rehearsals of *Richard II* in a wheelchair, due to his failing health. He inscribes, then, his own condition of being human into the synthesis he presents of youth and age, ability and disability, power and the loss of power – physical as well as social – life and death, strife and love, and transcendence. These are nothing if not key Shakespearean themes.

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