

THEATRE IN HUNGARY 2

Maria Shevtsova

Shakespeare in Gyula

Report on the Gyula Shakespeare Festival 2014, Previous festivals have been featured in NTQ108 (2011) and NTQ116 (2013).

THE GYULA Shakespeare Festival celebrated its tenth anniversary this year, coinciding with the 450th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth; and this double reason for partying made the festival quite special not only in the eyes of its founder Jozsef Gedeon but also for its spectators. The latter included MTVA (Hungarian National Television), which was back in its third year in a row to shoot productions and hold interviews with actors, directors, and several noted guests.

The status of the event prompted Gedeon to ask the National Theatre to premiere its *Midsummer Night's Dream* in Gyula rather than Budapest. Directed by David Doiashvili from Georgia, the work thrilled the outdoor audience in Gyula Castle on the opening night with its scintillating cast. Some of the best actors of the National Theatre scaled the black boxes that made up the set or

jumped on them or over them, or hung from them as they 'became' the forest and the bank where the 'wild thyme grows'. Or else they romped on top of them, or, as the production came to an end, they sat beneath the ledges that they formed to suggest a stage within a stage. Quite extraordinary lighting that might be described as silver on black created huge and powerful, constructivist-like shapes that accentuated the actors' stylized physicality. The latter, recalling Meyerhold's 'biomechanics', gave the production another 'constructivist' feature.

Most impressive of all, from an interpretative point of view, was the bitter-sweet quality of the production, which built up progressively as a tyrannical Oberon (Horvath Lajos Otto, who doubled as Theseus) lorded it over a feisty but nevertheless subordinated Titania (Eszter Nagy-Kalozy, who doubled as Hippolyta). Oberon is less playful than imperious, and, by the time he decides to draw to a close the whole game that he has set up at everybody's expense, it is too late to reassert his dominion: Titania has truly fallen in love with Bottom, and, as several scenes have shown, Bottom has given her the sexual time of her life. The refrain of a French pop song, blasted at strategic moments through the space – 'tu es formidable' and 'c'est formidable' – ironically but passionately tell the spectators that this has well and truly been more than a one-night stand.

Laughter, of which there is plenty, turns into a hush when Bottom silently falls at Titania's feet



A *Midsummers Night's Dream*, directed by David Doiashvili, with Nagy-Kalozy Eszter as Titania and Horvath Lajos Otto as Oberon.



Above: Fatyol Kamilla and Matyassy Bence as Hermia and Demetrius in the Gyula *Midsummers Night's Dream*.
 Below: Tompos Katya and Feher Tibor as Helena and Lysander.



and buries his face in her belly. He gets up just as silently, climbs up on to the stage within the stage, and leaves. Titania, forced to give up Bottom, cannot give herself up to Oberon. Suddenly, unexpectedly, Oberon shoots himself, bang in the head. The stakes of his game of roulette were too high, and *rien ne va plus*. The song's refrain returns

full blast, now primarily as a comment on the young lovers.

None of these complex layers of meaning would have been possible if Doiashvili had deprived Bottom and the mechanicals of dignity, while enjoying the humour of their scenes. Yet never for one minute is the humour at their



Szarvas Jozsef as Bottom, Nagy-Kalozy Ezster as Titania, and Horvath Lajos Otto as Oberon.



expense; and Bottom's ass's head is nothing more than two pointy ears – hardly enough to ridicule him or to ruin his charms for Titania.

The second major production of the festival was *Macbeth* from the Baltic House in St Petersburg. Its director, the Flemish Luk Perceval, is Executive Director of the Thalia Theatre in Ham-

burg, and he and his company are much appreciated at the Baltic House, which has invited a number of their productions during these past few years. They have included a remarkable, pared back, and taut *Brothers Karamazov*, which I had the good fortune to see there in 2013. *Macbeth*, his first work with the Baltic House actors, and so



Macbeth in Gyula, directed by Luk Perceva. Above: the witches.

also his first in Russian, has his trademark narrative concision. It also showcases his gift for drawing streamlined but not dry performances out of actors. His German actors generate emotion from internal combustion, which they dexterously contain as they go. More so Russian actors, who generally have a great deal of this kind of energy, which, to boot, they know how to stoke up so that what was smouldering seemingly invisibly turns tangible and white-hot.

These particular actors are no exception. Dodin-trained Leonid Alimov, whom I have seen close-up in rehearsals at the Maly Drama Theatre of St Petersburg, was virtually unrecognizable, so much had he developed as an actor. His searing performance of *Macbeth* was about the disintegration of the human soul; and, to balance Perceval's composition, it was matched by the horror of Lady Macbeth's descent into catatonic madness. A very young Maria Shulga in this role tugs at the flesh of her hands ('Out, damned spot') and barely moves as a mane of long hair obliterates her face. Her hair at this juncture is like that of the witches, except that theirs is much longer. It goes down virtually to their calves and covers their naked bodies front and back. Thus wrapped, they walk infinitely slowly on elevated steel rods, as on a tightrope, or sway gently on them.

Others, as these figures increase in number, move with the smallest of movements, lying down in very carefully restricted spaces along the floor. The stage is as black as sin but for the low, oblique light that is largely responsible for the eerie atmosphere enveloping the work from start to finish.

The witches are present throughout, and can be seen not as witches but as the tormented souls of hell. Their dance without words – for theirs is very much a dance piece – is the counterpoint of the dialogue which, if cut back to one and a half hours of intense performance, never loses the essence of Shakespeare's play. Since the witches do not speak, *Macbeth* reports what they had said, exactly as Lady Macbeth does in the letter scene. None of the events of the play has been removed, and most are narrated rather than shown, which is why the work can be so compact without losing its connecting links. All of the soliloquies are in place although the longest are shortened. Nothing, in other words, is lost for the sense and meaning of this concentrated vision of political ambition, eroticism (the relationship between *Macbeth* and Lady Macbeth), evil, and dark imagining.

Alimov has *Macbeth* imagine what it would be like to be a king with such urgency that it fills his



Above: Anatoly Dubanov as Duncan with Maria Shulga as Lady Macbeth, Dmitry Girev as Banquo at back.
Below: Leonid Alimov as Macbeth with Lady Macbeth.



entire body, driving its every shift and change; and the witches, by their continual presence, affect spectators subliminally, gradually allowing them to imagine that these are the damned in

torment, trapped in a perpetual limbo. The entire work avoids explanation, description or illustration (no Birnam Wood, no soldiers, no swords, no banquets, for example). Deep in the web of its

innuendoes lies the horror of the story: the heart of the unutterable darkness of humanity.

As usual, the festival sought to offer something for most people. Its musical selection saw the return of Belgian jazz singer and pianist Caroll Vanwelden and her German colleagues, although, this time, they performed a new series of Shakespeare sonnets. The second concert of sonnets was in slam poetry from the WH band, which had also performed in Gyula last year. Their vocalist, Ghana-born Veronika Sena Dagadu, seduced everyone in the room with a voice that could make any sound at any pitch in any suggestive tone. Demurely seated, her every move spoke of love and sex. Every play on sexual allusion was delivered without the slightest trace of vulgarity. She even elegantly played about with the most obvious sexual clichés, physically and vocally, and sent her predominantly young audience into raptures. Elsewhere, in a more sober concert, Shakespeare sonnets and songs were performed in an Elizabethan way with a viola da gamba and a lute.

A new event called the 'Fringe Festival' gathered five short 'street-theatre forms', as Gedeon defines them, one per evening, in front of the Castle. These amateur groups captured the attention of families strolling in the park or on their way to a café-bar nearby. Apart from giving burgeoning performers from around the country an opportunity to perform, they were intended to alert passers-by to the festival in the least didactic way possible. Gedeon knows full well that building up an audience for the longer term requires inspiring people's imagination, not least through their chance encounters with the theatre in unexpected circumstances.

Such passer-by 'introduction' was a spin-off of Piotr Kondrat's solo version of *Hamlet* by the lake beneath the illuminated Castle. Kondrat, a well-known Polish actor, intermittently fed a fire at the top of the bank of the lake, which attracted crowds. The paying spectators on the stage in the lake could see them silhouetted against the night sky.

The lit-up mass of castle wall, the burning pyre, and the flaming torches, which Kondrat whirled like a circus performer, were nothing if not dramatic for both the seated and the standing audiences. Even so, much of what Kondrat was doing would have appeared very strange to those who were some distance away from the action. He pulled skulls out of nowhere, dived into the water, talked in it, and kept on talking as he got out of it, drenched. You had to sit in the 'official' audience to hear and understand the three separate recorded sections from Vladimir Vysotsky's ballads (or read their translation from Russian into Hungarian on a small screen) in order to grasp that they were summing up, albeit in different words, Hamlet's reflections on the rotten state of Denmark as of his own.

A touring group of London's Globe Theatre brought a tawdry, cliché-ridden *Much Ado About Nothing* played by actors with cliché gusto. A few stamps of their feet here and there to lusty 'Oys' hoped to pass for dancing. Maladype, an independent company from Budapest, tried hard to impress in its experiments with *Macbeth/Anatomy*, but it fell into hyperbole and over-explicit 'message'. The skeleton of what looked like the dinosaur Tyrannosaurus Rex, which made up the set, proved, in fact, to be the skeleton of a rat. The point was driven home when Macbeth, now clearly the prototype of Hungary's ruling politicians, crawled from out of the skeleton's bones and had his head chopped off. Whereupon somebody brought in a cage of rats, which crawled over a plaster head that replaced the head of the poor actor. Ah, well, rat to rat . . .

The festival's two closing productions were closer to Gedeon's goals of quality. *Macbeth* by the Subotica company, an ethnic minority theatre from Serbia, gave a lively, gangster-cum-rock-cum-media-celebrity-style performance that really did hit today's politicians where it should hurt – in whichever country they rule and fool people. Raw, energetic, and skilful, the actors played multiple parts in a conical contraption with a platform on its top. The latter was ideal for the lip-sync, guts-open singing – into a microphone, of course. This contraption, which revolved continually, was divided into three sections, allowing for the quick change of characters and scenes necessary in such a small space. Director Hernyák György and his troupe carried off his mixture of spoof, satire, and political drama with aplomb, leaving no doubt whatsoever as to its critical intentions.

The last production was a deftly performed man-and-woman *Othello* with hand-held puppets. Jaime Lorca and Teresita Iacobelli from Chile played the four central roles of this play, rapidly alternating from one husband-and-wife couple to the other and developing a wide range of tone and mood for the whole piece in the process. Their emphasis was on the domestic story, focusing on the violence perpetrated by Othello on the one hand, and Iago on the other. Lorca and Iacobelli explained in our conversation after the show that their work targeted social groups in Chile who would benefit from its social-issue orientation and educative intentions. Publicist work it may well have been, but this *Othello* had an ebb and flow that captivated spectators, letting its 'lessons' sink into their unconscious.

Gedeon's budget was cut again for the 2014 edition of the festival, as it had been last year. Nevertheless, he still managed to bring two major productions to Gyula, and enough variety with the less ambitious ones to camouflage the threats posed to the arts by the still-current world economic crisis.