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En/decoding Shakespeare on the Present-day Ukrainian Stage: a Case of Vlad Troitskyi

Москвітіна Дар'я. За/розкодування Шекспіра на сучасній українській сцені: випадок Влада Троїцького.

Постановки Шекспірових драматургічних творів завжди були універсальною відповіддю на різноманітні естетичні, політичні та соціальні виклики доби. У сьогоденньому мінливому світі кожна подібна вистава не тільки відкриває нові грані знайомих сюжетів, але й допомагає осмислити певний травматичний досвід. Завдяки своїй надзвичайній гнучкості, тексти Шекспіра здатні взаємодіяти з самим духом певної національної культури; створюючи нові мистецькі прецеденти. А ті, у свою чергу, можуть служити потужними герменевтичними інструментами при вивченні як літературної спадщини Великого Барда, так і самої сприймаючої культури.

Подібну стратегію успішно застосовує Влад Троїцький, чий мистецький альянс із Шекспіром має довгу та плідну історію: з 2004 року він поставив декілька найбільш несподіваних, інноваційних та контроверсійних шекспірівських вистав в Україні. Його трилогія «Україна містична» є прикладом успішного вписування Шекспірових текстів у культурний простір нації, яка має абсолютно відмінні етнічні коріння. З одного боку, ці спектаклі, що поставлені у вигляді «прологів» до «Макбета», «Короля Ліра» та «Річарда III», актуалізують ідею про драму Шекспіра як досконалий камертон, здатний виявляти глибинні протиріччя у суспільстві. З іншого боку, ставлення режисера до драматургії англійця як до плідного ґрунту, на якому можуть розквітнути елементи автентичної української культури, дає можливість відкрити нові горизонти для інтерпретації та реінтерпретації ідей Шекспіра у європейському культурному просторі.

Ключові слова: Вільям Шекспір, Влад Троїцький, театр «Дах», постановка, постмодерністська інтерпретація, трансмутація, «Коріолан», «Україна містична».

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For Ukraine the year of 2014 was marked with great social and political shifts – revolution, Russian intervention, the war in Donbass – which were being observed closely by the whole world. Great social cataclysms can provoke definite alterations in self-estimation of a nation, and this leads to a change in its cultural paradigm. So, there is no wonder that during ESRA seminar at Craiova Shakespeare Festival the author of the present article was asked a question about new Ukrainian Shakespearean productions that might have appeared as a reaction to the events of EuroMaidan and the Revolution of Dignity. Then no definite answer was possible, as too little time had passed since those heroic tragic days, but it was obvious that very soon such productions would emerge.

This prediction was made upon the idea of the outstanding interpretational flexibility which is so typical of all Shakespearean plays. This very feature, which has been crafted by centuries of productions, criticism and intertextuality, determines the present-day status of Shakespearean canon as of a universal mirror in which the hidden essence of political, social and private life can be clearly seen. In this context Shakespeare stagings become far more significant than any other forms of intermediality. Compared to other arts, theatre is the most sensitive to the challenges of the day. Being the only natural habitat for the Bard's legacy, it evokes a new Shakespearean production with every turn of the chariot of History. The necessity of further studies of this hermeneutic potential of Shakespearean performances determines **the topicality** of this paper.

Thus, the present article **aims** at investigating the artistic peculiarities of modern Ukrainian Shakespeare productions, in particular those inspired by the most recent political events and the authentic Ukrainian ritualistic practices. The fact, that the present paper is the first research of *the Dakh theatre*

Shakespeare performances in Ukraine, secures its **scientific novelty**.

In November 2014 there was the first night of *Coriolanus* staged by one of rather intriguing and controversial theatre directors in Ukraine – Vlad Troitskyi, the founder of the *DAKH theatre*, whose Shakespeare-related artistic activity is **the object** of the article. He can boast a range of experimental and daring productions in which post-modern intentions are whimsically combined with authentic Ukrainian cultural codes. The way this approach is realized in Troitskyi's Shakespearean productions is **the subject-matter** of this paper.

Coriolanus became a real scoop in Kyiv theatre life. It belongs to the genre of 'new opera' in which libretto and music are created by the director and actors exclusively for a certain production. The performance, which has been presented only twice by far, reflects all major doubts and fears of the Ukrainian society of the time. When people were watching the massive murder of the Heavenly Hundred in the centre of Kyiv, broadcasted online, the shock and grief, felt by the whole nation, transformed into deep psychological wound. Staged half a year after the bloody events on Maidan, *Coriolanus* was to point a certain artistic strategy of a possible overcome of the recent traumas. Vlad Troitskyi himself defines this experiment as an attempt to raise the problem of heroism in everyday life. In numerous interviews he emphasizes that his *Coriolanus* is devoted to the conflict between the two modes of human behaviour (heroic and slavish)¹. This aspect is very topical in today's Ukraine where

¹ Also refer to: Потиха К. Влад Троицкий: «Герои живут внутри нас» [Электронный ресурс] / Карина Потиха. – Режим доступа : <http://styleinsider.com.ua/2015/02/vlad-troitskij-geroi-zhivut-vnutri-nas/>;
Ковалева А. Владислав Троицкий: «Герои разрушают покой, они не нужны ни нам, ни Европе» [Электронный ресурс] / Александра Ковалева. – Режим доступа : <http://gazeta.zn.ua/personalities/vladislav-troickiy-geroi-razrushayut-pokoy-oni-ne-nuzhny-ni-nam-ni-evrope-.html>

the dramatic political situation has caused a powerful wave of heroic deeds.

It is not the first time when Troitskyi attempts to adjust Shakespeare plays to the Ukrainian realia. In the beginning of the new millennium he produced a theatrical trilogy *Mystical Ukraine* which includes *Macbeth*, *Richard III* and *King Lear* staged as 'prologues'. This very claim creates certain genre expectations and presupposes interpretative mechanisms and techniques: if it is possible to make post-Shakespearean representations of the well-known plots, why not try and reconstruct pre-Shakespearean ones?

Re-encoding the Bard's plays he also intended to reveal the hidden identity, deeply rooted in the Ukrainian mentality. Troitskyi's versions of Shakespeare's dramatic works, with their renunciation of verbal component in favour of performing and ritualistic ones, make up a perfect example of transmutation. The notion of transmutation that is the synonym of intersemiotic translation, was conceptualized by the famous literary theorist Roman Jakobson as 'an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems'². Transmuted tragedies, with the sense conveyed by movement, music and masks, acquire the features of mime dramas which existed long before the emergence of theatre. Appealing to this form of theatrical representation the director wakes genetic memory of the Ukrainian nation and actualizes certain ethnic archetypes.

Troitskyi has always pointed to the striking resemblance between Shakespeare's plots and the current Ukrainian situation³. Thus, placing the stories of two kings of England

² Jakobson R. On Linguistic Aspects of Translation / Roman Jakobson // On Translation / ed. by Reuben A. Brower. – Harvard : Harvard University Press, 1959. – P. 233.

³ Also refer to: Куницкая К. Влад Троицкий ставит оперу по пьесе Шекспира «Кориолан» [Электронный ресурс] / К. Куницкая. – Режим доступа : http://culture.lb.ua/news/2014/08/28/277536_vlad_troitskiy_postavit_operu_pes_e.html?utm_source=local&utm_medium=cpm&utm_campaign=lenta;

and of a thane of Scotland into the Ukrainian cultural context, the director pursued a rather bold aim – to use the anthropological core of Shakespeare plots in order to make them and the Ukrainian society a double mirror for each other. The web-site of the *DAKH theatre* says that *Mystical Ukraine* is the result of joint multidirectional effort in revealing and discovering of hermetically-sealed energy of the Ukrainian land and culture⁴. Indeed, this project puts its main accent on the ‘ukrainianness’, employing the most popular forms of the national folklore – dance, song, vertep.

One of the immanent features of Vlad Troitskyi’s theatrical activity is that his productions do not claim to give definite answers but rather raise thought-provoking questions. The first and foremost interrogation inspired by these performances is – where can we find Shakespeare in this bright kaleidoscope of images, movements and authentic Ukrainian scenery? The fact is that in all three productions the director widely uses post-modern techniques of theatric narrative. This, in its turn, implies certain ‘decoding’ of Shakespeare ideas and senses in the whirlpool of absolutely unconventional means of representation.

This trilogy is the perfect specimen of the so-called ‘textless’ Shakespeare performance. Troitskyi deliberately removes verbal component and transposes the plots into the sphere of pure action, silent and hyper-realistic. Peeling off all those historical, stylistic, culturological and interpretative redundancies which these tragedies accreted in the course of centuries, the director gains the absolute exposure of the conflict. The plot kernels of each of the plays – Macbeth’s self-destructive treachery, tyranny of Richard III, and King

Заварова Н. Влад Троицкий: «Художник должен размышлять сердцем» [Электронный ресурс] / Н. Заварова. – Режим доступа : <http://cultprostir.ua/ru/post/vlad-troickiy-khudozhnik-dolzhen-razmyshlyat-serdsem>.

⁴ Проект «Україна містична» [Електронний ресурс]. – Режим доступу : <http://dax.com.ua/ru/myst>.

Lear's late insight – are represented as archetypal situations. Here we can observe as a pre-text (in the widest meaning of the word) is created out of the classical text. The Bard, who never invented plots, wrote, however, the so-called reference variants of the well-known stories. Vlad Troitskyi converts Shakespearean narratives into their pre-historic, pre-theatrical, pre-Shakespearean forms of existence. The eternal, universal plots, which were, probably, created at the dawn of the world, are returned into the ritualistic, mystical context which generated them. The centuries-long theatrical tradition has been crisscrossed and we see the most primitive (and the most natural!) forms of performance – mimic dance, rhythmic music and masks.

The actors deprived of such instruments as words and voices have to exploit plastic potential of their bodies. For instance, in *Prologue to Macbeth* dance-like movements become the major expressive means, and the origin of these moves is different – some of them come from the traditional Japanese theatre, others – from the Ukrainian folk dances or from the European ball dances. Their mixture creates the mystic atmosphere which reminds of authentic rituals and thus penetrates the spectators' subconscious. These performances sort of reconstruct those ancient times when the first humans felt like miming nature through acting and, as a result, became 'homo ludens'.

Despite the lack of vivid expressive speech, mimics and emotional colouring, all performances can boast original and very authentic visual elements. First of all, it is mostly in the aspect of scenery, costumes and makeup that Shakespeare texts are being integrated into the Ukrainian context. Vlad Troitskyi widely employs national costumes and patterns of folk craft: embroidery, carpet making, weaving, painting, straw work, etc. Bright and colourful scenery of *Prologue to Macbeth* reminds of the well-known film *The Shadows of Forgotten Folks* shot by a genius director Sergey Parajanov.

The open-air performances *Prologue to Richard III*, as well as the chamber show *Prologue to King Lear* take advantage of fire scenery. Torches placed in the perimeter of the stage area inspire associations with archaic times and bear certain mystical and ritualistic meaning.

Special tribute should be paid to the masks which are used in all the performances. Hiding actors' and actresses' faces Troitskyi gains total selflessness, personalities are erased which enables cross-gender acting: for example, in *Prologue to Richard III* the roles of Clarence and of the executors are played by women. Besides, introducing masks, the director follows and develops truly Shakespearean concept of 'world as a stage' where 'all the men and women merely players'. Masks, the most ancient emblem of theatre and the quintessence of acting, are worn in the performances only by those people who belong to the material world. For example, in *Prologue to Macbeth* King Duncan wears a crowned mask which after his assassination is taken off and passed to the treacherous thane. On the contrary, Banquo and his bride act without masks, and this is to symbolize their imminent death. The Murderer and Weird Sisters also act with faces uncovered, but the Murderer is the person who guides people to better world, and the witches belong to supernatural powers and have nothing in common with earthly people.

Masks for the performances are made in an emphatically plain, primitive, authentic and, at the same time, grotesque manner. Unlike masks in the Greek or Japanese theatres, masks in *Prologues...* do not show any definite facial expression – that of joy, grief, sorrow or whatever. In *Richard III* they demonstrate either bizarre hard-set mimics (grotesque oversized noses, mouths or cheeks), or total absence of any expression – masks are made of just a piece of canvas with holes for eyes and lips. In *King Lear* the masks, like Venetian ones, copy human faces, but are made to look

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deliberately tough, unrefined, and unpolished. In *Macbeth* the masks are sometimes replaced by face-covering makeup which also looks as archaic as possible – whitewash and mud on the actors' faces. Mask here is a powerful tool of creating a theatrical narrative, an efficient means to hide true identity, implement stage conventions, form the required atmosphere, and state the receptive direction.

Another archaic element used by Troitskyi for *Mystical Ukraine* performances is the chorus the function of which is performed by *DakhaBrakha* ethno-chaos band, a side-project of *DAKH theatre* actors. However, the general idea of the chorus has been dramatically transformed. Though being present on the stage during the whole show, the chorus does not make comments or give insights on the action (*Macbeth* is an exclusion), but rather accompanies it, functioning more like a choir. *Dakhabrakha* musicians are dressed in folklore costumes and exaggerated sheep hair hats. Playing various drums, cello and drymba (a Carpathian variant of the Jewish Harp) they dictate the tempo-rhythm of the performance. They also create the inimitable atmosphere of a folklore mystery by singing ritual songs – hymeneals, lullabies, vesniankas (special folk spring songs), Cossack tunes and harvest songs, borrowed from different regions of Ukraine. The soundtrack to every performance is as motley as a patchwork blanket, though it is always in solid unity with the performance itself.

Troitskyi's post-modern interpretations of the Bard's famous tragedies cannot be viewed in the coordinates of more or less traditional Shakespeare productions. Right according to the theoretic postulate of the death of the author, proclaimed by Roland Barthes, Shakespeare is gently removed out of his plays. His *inventio* and stage conventions are totally neglected, and it is proposed to view Shakespeare plots (which he never fully created, anyway) as those authored by the collective subconscious. It looks as if there

has never been any *Guillelmus, filius Johannes*, the most famous playwright of all epochs. At the same time Troitskyi 'resurrects' the Bard in order to provide interpretative determination to the productions, and supply them with a certain 'code'. In other words, all the mystic, enigmatic, captivating half-rituals and half-performances observed on the stage are associated with Shakespeare because they are attributed to the Bard by the director's intention. Thus, certain interpretative conventions are being automatically launched, and a spectator perceives the performances as integrated, though very unusual, part of the stage Shakespeareana. Vlad Troitskyi daringly employs Shakespeare's dramatic works as a field of experiment, projecting various eclectic theatre techniques on it. Making the most distant – archaic and post-modern – traditions meet in the framework of one artistic space, the director creates a sort of uroboros, a symbol of eternity, where Shakespeare plays will always be timely, and will always be used to create a certain prospective for successful problem solution.