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REMEDIATING GLOBAL MEDIA IN RECENT SHAKESPEARE PRODUCTIONS ON ROMANIAN STAGES

Abstract

The paper discusses recent Romanian Shakespeare productions of *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Bucharest. It argues that global mass culture, in the form of TV sitcoms and musicals, YouTube clips and computer games, is re-circulated on Romanian stages with the result of re-mediating the older forms of Romanian Shakespeare performances. The paper interrogates the popular character of the new type of productions, which are largely unpolitical and motivated by commercial reasons. The last part of the paper presents a radical deconstruction of Shakespeare's text in the form of a computer game, which, however, re-introduces the political orientation of older, pre-1989 performances.

Key words: Shakespeare, mass culture, globalization, new media

Recent Shakespeare performances in Romania apparently gainsay the idea, dear to theatre Shakespeare critics, that stage Shakespeare is somehow protected from the impact of global culture and can therefore retain "the authentic" quality of an experience tailored to the needs and concerns of a particular audience. This genuinely local Shakespeare can be thus counterpoised to the globalized, deterritorialized one circulated by the media. However, as the local can nowadays be conceived only in relation with the global, and is increasingly refashioned by the latter, the "local" of theatre productions inevitably provides a version of a fully "glocalized" Shakespeare. This has been my experience of the recent Shakespeare productions shown in the Bucharest theatres.

This paper would like to argue that the Shakespeare productions of the 2014–15 season in Bucharest (to be more precise: two productions of *The Tempest* and two of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and a collage called *Distopie. Shakespeare. Remix*) could be regarded as an instance of re-circulating and remediating global popular culture (films, TV, YouTube and computer games), with

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Shakespeare providing a system of meanings, a framework within which the global-local nexus can be established.

The new (“global”) turn in the treatment of Shakespeare on Romanian stages has emerged as a way to address an ongoing crisis in/of the theatre as well as changes in the taste and expectations of the audience. Ever since the ‘89 events and particularly during the rapid commercialization of Romanian culture, the theatre has been hard put to legitimize its function. The previous political and high culture mission had to be discarded as irrelevant, as the 21st century Romanian theatre has reconceived itself mostly as entertainment, trying to compete with the movie multiplexes in the malls, with cable TV or the internet. Its audience has also undergone radical changes: it is no longer made up of highbrow and elitist spectators but mostly of less educated middle aged people, who are keen viewers of local TV programs, such as sitcoms, gossip programs and musicals. Not surprisingly, it is the experimental theatres on the fringes that have been attractive to young audiences. The latter are generally fully literate in the new visual culture and expect the theatre to reproduce the very strategies, conventions and type of visuality of this culture.

Theatre practitioners have understood that in order for the theatre to survive it has to recast itself in terms of the requirements of popular culture and of the devices of global media (which often means introducing cinematic devices and fast pacing, short (soundbite) dialogues, flat (cartoonish) characters and slapstick humour and plenty of sound and light effects). Canonical authors like Shakespeare, now relatively marginal, have had to be recalibrated to the concerns and screen styles of the global mass culture. In this respect Romanian stage productions reiterate the moves that have already occurred in the Shakespeare film industry (Lanier, 2010: 104–107). Yet what I would like to argue is that it is not only the global Shakespeare on screen that is re-circulated on Romanian stages, but also conventions, styles, modes of address of other forms of global (new) media, such as blockbusters and fantasy movies, TV sitcoms and musicals, YouTube clips and computer games.

One striking result of this re-articulation of Shakespeare in the recent Romanian theatre productions has been what D. Lanier has described as “post-textual Shakespeare”, albeit Lanier has used the term in conjunction with Shakespeare on screen (Lanier, 2011: 145–6). Romanian theatre has always had a rather lax attitude towards the translated Shakespearean text; directors have often commissioned their own versions, which in the socialist period could not bear printing as they departed significantly from the original or were a collage of various translations. The novelty of recent stage versions is that they have radically re-scripted and localized the translations employed, which in their turn have been strongly updated so as to meet with the requirements of the new audience (Ieronim, 2009). Consequently, the stage script not only introduces radical cuts and alterations, but it often bears only a remote resemblance to the Shakespearean text. A radical refashioning of Shakespeare's text seems to be generally regarded as a “must” in 21st century Romanian productions. Shakespeare is still of our age, but, not unlike in the 18th century, his plays have to be re-written.¹

To begin with, monologues tend to be reduced or cut altogether. The few recognizable soliloquies that are preserved, when they have not been reduced to two lines, strike a strange note as if they had been imported from another script. The impression produced is of a spectral Shakespeare that few can relate to or understand. This is the case of Victor Frunză's experiment of performing *The Tempest* with only four actors. The actor who plays Prospero, George Costin, also appears in the roles of Antonio and Stephano. George Costin is so exhausted by his role as Stephano, having to improvise so as to establish a close rapport with the audience, that he can no longer muster the energy to perform Prospero's monologues in the final act. Moreover, Prospero's presence and action is

¹ In an interesting debate organized by the theatre journal *Scena.ro* in 2009, theatre people fully agreed on the recent trend of updating Shakespeare so as to make him more legible and accessible. New translations are needed to target a new kind of audience, no longer made up of highbrow representatives of the past print culture. There was general consensus that Shakespeare should speak the modern Romanian language of present day audiences. Director Alexander Hausvater suggested that a modern translation in a “fresh” language would counter present fears to approach Shakespeare, whose stories and heroes are perceived as no longer of our times. Other directors (Radu Nica) were in favour of a radical refashioning of Shakespeare so as to tell the stories in a more transparent way, similar to that employed in movies, and using a tough even if more banal poetry (Marinescu, 2009).

radically compressed due to extensive cuts in the play which are designed to make more room for the Trinculo, Stephano and Caliban interaction. In the new economy of the play, Prospero's monologues sound unconvincing and strike a dissonant note with the bulk of the performance.

Ion Caramitru as Prospero in Alexander Morfov's lavish production at the National Theatre enjoys a more substantial stage presence², yet he too has to play down his role and suppress his celebrated theatrical skills in reciting poetry in order to perform Prospero as a senile Einstein. Caramitru's performance faintly echoes Liviu Ciulei's production at Teatrul Bulandra in 1977, where Prospero was projected as a man of science³. The 21st century Prospero, however, is a burlesque version of Ciulei's design: he is not in control of the action, never returns to Milan and the whole plot is suggested to have been mere wishful thinking, a fantasy.⁴ Caramitru does deliver two monologues in his powerful style, but like in Frunză's production, they sound out of place, almost a grotesque parody, in the context of the farcical bustle that occupies much of the stage.

As can be expected, Caliban is all comedy and no poetry. In Morfov's production he is completely reduced to the condition of a bagman and cannot transcend his condition. The description of the isle's "noises, sounds, and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not" (III.2) is cut out as it no longer fits in with his job description. The Caliban of Victor Frunză's production of *The Tempest* discussed above does rescue the poetry of these lines, with the actor doubling the role with that of Ariel. The two roles contaminate each other in a playful manner and the lines of childish Caliban provide the only moments of poetry in the production.

Gelu Colceac's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Teatrul Mic also does away with monologues. Theseus only utters the first line of "The poet, the lover and the madman are of imagination all compact" monologue (V.1) and so does Bottom with his "I have had a dream—past the wit of man to say what dream it was..." speech (IV.1). Bottom no longer remembers any dream he might have experienced. In fact, he is hardly shown interacting with Titania and has no lines in the scene, therefore he has little to remember. The actor's energy is completely focused on the slapstick comedy of the scenes with the Mechanicals. Not unlike in Frunză's production of *The Tempest*, these scenes are double in length, allowing for the actors' improvisations and topical jokes. The comedy around the Mechanicals' play provides the greatest attraction of the performance, next to the musical number of the fairies' singing and dancing.

In all the three productions the low life scenes of buffoonery and clowning are expanded into the centre piece of the performances. It is here that the re-scripting of the text, involving the directors/actors further augmentations, is most striking. The actors' highly colloquial and even slangy Romanian language domesticate Shakespeare's text out of recognition. One can speak of a glocalization of the respective scenes rather than a localization of the Shakespeare translation, as the script reiterates and remediates the style and humour of local TV sitcoms (*Vacanța Mare, La Bloc*) which are copycat versions of global programs or American sitcoms like *Married with Children* (see also Lucaciu, 2011)⁵. The scenes with the Mechanicals are therefore a further localization of glocalized mass culture. The audience feels at ease with such familiar content and laughs at familiar gags and clichés taken from familiar TV programs. As Lanier has pointed out, the assimilation of Shakespeare into global/glocal mass culture lends him street credibility and broad intelligibility (Lanier, 2010: 104).

² Alexander Morfov's production *The Tempest* was first staged in Sofia in 1996, then in Moscow and St Petersburg in 2006. For the performances in Russia he received the most prestigious Russian theatre award: "The Golden Mask Award". Ion Caramitru has played in a number of Shakespearean plays, being one of the most celebrated Romanian actors. He became particularly famous for his performance of Hamlet in Alexandru Tocilescu's production at the Bulandra Theatre 1985. After 1989, Caramitru received a high position in the post-communist government; he took the *Hamlet* production on a tour in the UK and was widely acclaimed. At present, he is the director of The National Theatre in Bucharest.

³ In Ciulei's production, Caramitru played the role of Ferdinand.

⁴ Caramitru and Morfov could be said to recycle Purcărete's reading of the play in his 2012 adaptation *A Tempest*, which clearly suggests that the whole plot was but Prospero's dream.

⁵ Ramona Wray has pointed out how the 2005 BBC adaptations of *Much Ado* and *The Shrew* were very much indebted to popular TV serials such as the Bridget Jones series (Wray, 2006: 197–8). What is interesting about the Romanian situation is the migration of these formats onto the stage.

In a similar vein, the Bulgarian director Alexander Morfov and the actors from the National Theatre in Bucharest expand the number of clowns, recasting Trinculo and Stephano as leaders of rival football fans, who greet, quarrel and almost fight using well known clichés. The trite humor of such encounters spills over into the auditorium, as the actors adopt various positions in the hall and mix with the audience. Ariel's role is fragmented and distributed among a team of six fairies who also perform acrobatic numbers on the stage. Their jokes with Caliban as he is trying to write some lines of poetry add up to an entirely new script, written in the style of the afternoon programs and sitcoms on the popular culture channel PROTV. The pop music hits that accompany such scenes further enhance the general impression of easy legibility that relies on the recognition of the familiar.

Frunză's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* appeals to a more sophisticated audience that can enjoy the remediation of blockbusters and fantasy films in form of parody. The acting tries to reproduce the fast pace and smooth editing of blockbusters, the action proceeds at an incredible pace and lasts less than an hour and a half without an interval. The special lighting and sound effects of fantasy movies are produced on stage using simple means such as smoke, balloons, drums and string instruments played by the actors themselves. The lovers reproduce the style of teen films, with Helena and Hermia recognizably dressed as American high school students. Puck is a malicious, even cruel, youngster out for quick and crude sex. The minimalist yet sophisticated set indirectly alludes to the quality of remediation and recycling of the performance. The Mechanicals' costumes, for example, are funnily made up of recycled material such as coke cans and bubble wrapping paper, whereas the set of their play is made of plastic bottles of mineral water. The acting style all through the performance is of a controlled, almost imperceptible parody of the acting in American movies. There is a feeling among the audience of not being able to emotionally relate to the characters. Their emotions and suffering strike as inauthentic, or – as a critic put it – lack sensitivity as if they had been immersed in ice and were cooled off (Andronescu, 2014b). Upon closer inspection one understands that this effect is derived from the patterning of actors' playing on that of characters in computer games. They elicit similarly distanced responses, working against the intimacy that a small theatre like the Metropolis is designed to produce. The difficult experiment with remediating strategies of the new media in Frunză's production explains why its success has been limited to a niche audience, unlike the wide public appeal of Colceag's *Dream* at Teatrul Mic.

Of course, one cannot but raise the question whether the critical position adopted in this paper so far has been too conservative to do the proper justice to the productions. The insistence on the plebeian aspects of the performances along with the actors' interpolations and improvisations could well be read as a marked shift away from the elitist Shakespeare. This was the hallmark of Romanian productions in the latter half of the 20th century, which gave way to present-day popular Shakespeare productions aimed at a more inclusive audience. Present-day Romanian critics and theatre people have admitted that the employment of elements of popular culture entailing "the dumbing down" of Shakespeare is a strategy designed mainly to ensure the larger audiences the theatres desperately need in order to survive financially (Andronescu, 2014a). For all that, what has been considered in this paper as the remediation of the theatre in line with global media culture could be read in another key, namely as a challenge to text-based productions of Shakespeare and to their status as "highbrow" cultural icon (Purcell, 2009: 77-92). However, what has particularly struck me about the productions discussed in this paper is that they were not aimed at challenging the opposition between highbrow culture (to which "official" Shakespeare, as Purcell calls him, used to be associated with) and the popular lowbrow culture (which in Romania is commonly associated with serials and sitcoms). To the contrary, the elements of mass culture indirectly reassert the opposition between the two types of culture. In Morfov's staging at the National Theatre, the popular strand, though providing entertainment and producing laughter among the audience, was treated ambiguously. The replacement of Shakespeare's comedic ending with a semi-tragic one calls for a critical awareness of mass culture: Prospero cannot leave the island, his actions and everything the audience have been watching have been mere pipe dreams. This suggests a nostalgia for the pre-1989 "classical" Prospero/Shakespeare, who is nowadays doomed to failure and has no more room in the present global mass-culture.

The experimental production of *Distopie. Shakespeare. Remix* at The National Theatre by a group of very young actors foregrounds the issue of remediating and appropriating Shakespeare in the New Media. What the production seems to be challenging is not so much the canonical position of Shakespeare but the political assumptions of the new media culture in which he is circulated. The

production sets out to represent on stage a computer game, called *Zoon politicon*, with the actors performing the characters that the presumed participants will play and whose basic narrative is provided by the *King Lear* plotline (with major changes, however), whereas the verbal interaction between characters/participants is made up of a clever splicing of scenes, lines and monologues from *King Lear*, but also from *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, *Henry IV*, *The Tempest*. There is also the indirect reward to the audience for the recognition of the plays and scenes, which amounts to a second game included in the show and which is most appealing to theatre students and fellow actors, rather than to the general audience.

The major goal of the theatrical experiment is to project an image of the continuing deterioration of the political in terms of the images and conventions most familiar to present-day theatre audiences: these are on the one hand the conventions and strategies of video games and on the other hand Shakespeare's texts, as a repository of Western values, goals and patterns of action. The production is very much attuned to recent political events that are particularly worrying to Romanian audiences, namely the Russian invasion of Crimea and the war with Ukraine or the Greek economic and political crisis. The dark outcome of the successive levels and rounds of the game reflects the persistence of Jan Kott's political readings of Shakespeare among theatre students, as the production is not only a recycling and a remediation of Shakespeare's plays, but also of Kott's concept of the "grand mechanism" (power structures that are circularly reproduced in increasingly negative terms) developed in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. In this respect, *Distopie. Shakespeare. Remix* is the only Shakespeare production that dares reintroduce an uncomfortable political dimension.

The audience are both drawn into the game and distanced from it in a kind of Brechtian interaction; the posters common in Brecht's epic theatre are replaced by two huge computer screens. They provide a run-on comment on the action, show images of the absent Lear/ruler figure, give Google definitions for terms such as a "failed state", display articles and photos from press archives. The computer screens are further used to initiate interactive games with the audience.

Shakespeare's texts are fragmented, de- and re-contextualized, "repurposed" and remediated in the computer game interaction between two rival parties (Goneril and Lord Albany versus Regan and Lord Cornwall) who compete for the power position left vacant by Lear. Cordelia loses out in the first round of the game and has to exit the game, only to re-enter it as the Fool. The bricolage with Shakespeare's texts indicates the actors'/the director's familiarity with Shakespeare on YouTube productions, where important scenes or soliloquies are "mashed up" with the producers' own content (Neill, 2014: 74). For example: the country is declared bankrupt (the computer screens show IFM comments on the situation in Greece as well as older articles on the economic situation in Romania), Lord Albany is faced with the options of raising taxes or securing a substantial loan from unwilling creditors; as he negotiates for the loan, the actors play the scene between Antonio and Shylock (I.3). The actor playing Shylock gives a moving performance of Shylock's famous speech "I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes?" (III.1). These lines, however, become rather puzzling in the economic and political context (Greece's financial difficulties) the scene alludes to. Another example: Lord Cornwall has won the fight with Albany and has become the new absolute king; in his double quality as Shakespearean character and participant in the game, he suppresses the Game Master and introduces his own autocratic rules. In order to legitimate his action, Cornwall delivers Brutus's speech on the reasons for murdering Caesar (III.2). The speech is redeployed to indicate the rhetorical ruses of present-day politicians who appropriate Shakespeare for undemocratic purposes. *Distopie. Shakespeare. Remix*. functions as a powerful comment on the present-day deterioration of both the cultural legacy and the political system. It reintroduces the political reading of Shakespeare in the communist period, albeit in a postmodern, deconstructed and remediated form. The unexpected success and long life of the production suggests that the combination of mass culture and Shakespeare can hold out other promises than dumbing down the Bard.

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