

Theatre Reviews

Cabbages and Kings: Posthumanistic Shakespeare on the Contemporary Ukrainian Stage.

Reviewed by *Bohdan Korneliuk**, *Daria Moskvitina***

The current Shakespearean stage in Ukraine is a patchwork of styles, play choices and artistic intentions. In the past three decades, post-Soviet Ukrainian theatre has developed its approach to Shakespeare, which can be characterized as “glocal”. Some native stage practitioners emphasize their openness to up-to-the-minute tendencies, which enable the genuine integration of the Ukrainian theatre into the global Shakespearean context, whereas others mainly focus on the local issues employing Shakespeare’s plays as a source for travesties, burlesques, remakes, and retakes aimed at putting current social problems in the spotlight.

The specifics of the modern technology-driven world and the crisis of anthropocentrism in the media and art forms cannot but reflect on the performing arts both globally and locally. In this respect, a posthuman theoretical perspective undermines the role of the human as the only creature capable of speaking the self. As wisely perceived by John D. Peters,

The chief challenge to communication in the twentieth century is contact with beings that lack mortal form. Communication is something we share with animals and computers, extraterrestrials and angels. As beings who not only speak but communicate, we reveal our mechanical, bestial, and ethereal affinities. The concept respects none of the metaphysical barriers that once protected human uniqueness. (227-228)

* Khortytsia National Academy, Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine. korneljukbogdan@ukr.net

** Zaporizhzhia State Medical University, Ukraine. daryamoskvitina@gmail.com

The posthuman approach in the Ukrainian theatre also has a glocal character. On the one hand, it is determined by a globally shared mistrust in the human and the grand narrative resulting from technological advancement, environmental issues and generally dystopic prognoses about the future. On the other hand, an influential factor is the country's Soviet past, when art was serving a propaganda that stated the invaluable role of the human in the Communist society, whereas the reality was totally different: an individual felt a lack of safety and recognition, could not accommodate their basic needs, and permanently had cognitive dissonance due to the striking contrast between propaganda and reality. The idea of creating "a new human" had been on top of the agenda since the very start of the Communist project, and by the 1970s it got its shape as "homo sovetikus"—"a new, superior type of a human" (Heller, 9). This notion was critically scrutinized and revisited by Aleksander Zinoviev, who reveals its double-faced and perverted nature, roughly defining "homo sovetikus" as "a Bircher being ahead of the utmost progress" (350). Indeed, collectivism, practiced for decades, as well as the purge of the 1930s-1950s, led to a total dissociation of humans from their individuality: the vast majority perceived themselves as cogs in the machine—silent, unheard and unable to take decisions. In order to unite with the self and the humane, people needed to individuate themselves, to create a safe space where they could relax from the official agenda and eventually tie the human to the humane.

This general disbelief in the role of the human promoted by the official narrative was clearly marked at a mundane level: e.g. the Soviet colloquial phraseology included the phrase "to live like a human", meaning to have a decent, high-quality life. As for artistic practices, the manifestation of this disbelief became possible after the USSR collapsed, when art became free from its propaganda duties. A good example here is monumental art. During Soviet decades, monuments to people—both real historic figures such as Vladimir Lenin and symbolic embodiments, such as *The Worker* and *The Peasant Woman*, or *The Metallurgist*—generally prevailed in the USSR. However, when ideology gave way to competition and the necessity to make this or that region attractive for tourists, monuments to humans were rivalled by monuments to non-human objects, such as local products (tomato, gobi fish, cucumber, watermelon), manufactured products (metal, sugar), national food (halushka, varenyk, deruny), abstract notions (greed [symbolized by a toad], bribe [embodied in an orange], happy childhood [a Soviet-style tricycle]). This tendency clearly marks the perplexity about the human and their role in the society, which post-Soviet Ukrainians still feel, and it can be traced in some theatrical performances, Shakespeare-based in particular. The productions selected for consideration in this review were mostly not intended to be remarkably posthumanist, but they definitely invite a posthumanistic reading, which we used here as a viewing strategy.

The first attempts to employ Shakespeare's dramatic legacy as a mirror to reflect Ukrainian contexts can be traced as early as 2004, when *A Prologue to Macbeth* (dir. Vlad Troitskyi), the first part of the Shakespeare-based trilogy *Mystical Ukraine*, premiered in *The Dakh Theatre* in Kyiv. This show represented the story of a treacherous thane: on the one hand, it was transplanted into the Ukrainian cultural context, with the colourful aesthetics of traditional costumes and a soundtrack of folk songs performed by DakhaBrakha ethno-chaos band; on the other hand, it was seen as a commonly recognized ritual that alluded to the times when humanity did not have the gift of speech and was deeper integrated in nature. Staging *Macbeth* as "a prologue" suggested bringing "Shakespearean narrative in its pre-historic, pre-theatrical and pre-Shakespearean form of existence" (Moskvitina).

This 70-minute-long production represented only key scenes from the original play—Macbeth and Banquo returning from the war, the Weird Sisters' prophecy, Duncan's murder, the scenes with Banquo and his bride (invented by the director), Lady Macbeth's madness and the death of both Macbeth and his wife. The choice was not random; Troitskyi deliberately peeled off all the side plotlines, exposing and emphasizing the archetypal conflict of love and betrayal, and the tragedy of infertility, which, as interpreted by the director, is indeed the source of all the clashes in the story.

The ritualistic character of the production was emphasized by the artistic methods employed. Troitskyi definitely alluded to prehistoric animism and totemism, by factually equating humans to animals, or even making the latter the measure, if not of all things, at least of chronology. The performance started with a prologue: "It was a long time ago. There weren't any geese at that time. There were only ducks. Rather there were some geese but they were very wild. So, somewhere, not in our land, and, by the way, we didn't have any geese yet. We only had some ducks. Rather we had some geese but they were wild. So, in one kingdom, in a distant land, once upon a time, there was a king. Well, not really a king. For he was a kind man. And the people... Well, you know what kind of beasts people are. The people like everywhere. Dogs—not people" (copied from English subtitles, left unedited). As we can see, people are compared to beasts and dogs, and, in order to reveal that animal side of the characters, the director deprived actors of vocal tools, allowing them only mimetic movements for artistic expression. Moreover, alongside the king and the nobility, some animal characters of symbolic nature were introduced—for instance, the Bird, accompanying Lady Macbeth. It wore a white gown decorated with Ukrainian traditional embroidery and a plague doctor mask. Owing to its long beak, the Bird unmistakably resembled a stork, which is a traditional symbol of childbirth. However, infertile Lady Macbeth, even protected by the red and white bird, could not have children, and when the witches brought her a doll instead of a real baby, this spurred her next fit of

madness. The Bird was closely tied to Prybluda (Foundling)—an ugly demonic creature that also contributed to Lady Macbeth's mental disorder. To crown it all, the Goat appeared in the finale, not to be sacrificed according to its eternal function, but together with Foundling, to bring Macbeth to his fall and death. The message of this production was quite ambiguous and welcomed an abundance of interpretations, the most obvious of which being that the human is a part of nature, and not the king of the world by default; it takes an effort to really be a human, otherwise animal and demonic parts of character will prevail.

The theatrical trend of introducing posthumanist elements was continued in Kyiv's experimental Free Stage Theatre, founded in 2001 by the Ukrainian director Dmytro Bohomazov. This independent, privately owned venue for under 50 spectators allowed for radical experimentation that was impossible in state theatres. In 2008 Bohomazov premiered an electro-acoustic opera performance ironically titled *Sweet Dreams, Richard*. This 50-minute-long production was based on an episode of the Shakespearean history that many contemporary directors omit or abridge—the nightmare Richard III sees on the eve of the battle with Richmond. Bohomazov masterfully turned the stage action into phantasmagoria combining Shakespeare's text with performance art, unconventional audio-visual techniques and contemporary choreography. Richard was the only human-like figure in the production, whereas ghosts reminded of gruesome monsters typical of horror films. They appeared on the stage in mummy-like costumes, wrapped in bandages, and a video projection created their multiple phantom images, which were reflected on the walls and Richard's body. This approach allowed a rethinking of the dichotomies of real and fake, original and copy, physical being and its multimedia reproduction, creating a tension between the material and the virtual. Special microphones captured the actors' voices, and tailor-made audio software instantly processed them so that the audience heard the transformed audio signal with altered frequency, duration, timbre, dynamics and volume. Variations to the sound were arbitrary, making it technically impossible to predict or reproduce their result. So, ghosts transcended the boundaries of the body when multiplied by video projections, and their voices, enhanced by the innovative technology, became cyborgial. Iryna Chuzhynova notes that "recitative curses of ghosts turn into a kind of 'chant' with complex coloratura passages, sometimes letting out a howl, then a whisper" (61). The otherworldly nature of this performance was further emphasized by the fact that the actors performed in English. Moreover, the use of a foreign language allowed the audience to focus more sharply on the visual imagery and aural transmutations. To this day this production remains one of the few multimedia Shakespearean performances making digital technologies the essential part of the show based on the classical text.

In the solo performance *Richard after Richard* (2007) the character's posthuman transition took place post mortem. Being deprived of his body,

Richard became a post-gender creature: Lidia Danylchuk, who played the part, had a distinct androgynous look and used pitch variations ranging from a deep sound, made with her strong chest voice, to an occasional much higher and softer sound (we will use the gender-neutral pronoun “they” to refer to the character). Nothing in Richard’s postmortem appearance alluded to their kingly status—they were not wearing a crown, instead we saw the protagonist in a formal black suit and a black tie, bearing no hint to the occupation or social role of their owner (a black jacket and tie appear on one of the posters of the production substituting for the typical crown, which has become a common staple of theatre posters for *Richard III*). Richard’s life after death lay in the temporal zone outside the usual earthly time—on several occasions they repeated the question “Ay, what’s o’clock?”, in different languages and to no answer. A round magnet with 12 knives attached to it was constantly hanging over the protagonist—it might be seen as a clock with no hands and as a depiction of the cruel nature of time, which literally kills, and to which Richard himself fell victim. The postmortem time flow in the production was recognizably post-modern in its non-linear nature, with frequent overlapping scenes and multiple verbal repetitions. Danylchuk’s Richard spoke different languages (namely Ukrainian, English, German, Russian and Belarusian) showing their disidentification, as opposed to a single national identity. Using the original text, created in the late 16th century, back-to-back with modern-day translations also enabled blurring the time distinctions. Thus, when freed from their bodily form, Richard loses the identities anchoring them to a certain gender, nation, social strata and time period.

Incorporeal *Richard after Richard* encapsulated the posthuman idea of being beyond dichotomies and linearity. On a greater scale the production depicted not only postmortem but also post-apocalyptic Richard—the inhumane human contributing to the distinction of humanity, at once relishing and suffering from the fruits of his vicious deeds. The production employed minimalist stage design, endowing each prop with multiple functions and several symbolic meanings, which the audience might recognize. In the very centre of the stage one could see a small, square, folding table placed on the plastic mat that Richard pompously rolled out to some brisk music. In the context of the performance these props became multifunctional. In the course of the production this piece of furniture evoked different associations—at first it was used as a desk or a lectern (the latter association was strengthened by Richard’s formal attire), then it became a drum (when the protagonist sung Shakespeare’s lines and created a galloping beat with two knives and the table’s surface), and eventually, when the character started chopping cabbages obsessively, it turned into a kitchen table, or, if one develops the symbolic meaning of a cabbage head to its extreme, a surgical, or even a butcher’s table. Cabbage was chosen as the

central object of the production, and throughout the performance it unravelled its rich symbolic potential. It blurred the nature/culture divide, being a natural object profoundly grounded in the Ukrainian customs and traditions. In Ukraine this vegetable is highly regarded as the indispensable ingredient of the two signature dishes of local cuisine—namely, borscht (vegetable soup including beets, cabbage, carrots, onions, potatoes and tomatoes) and holubtsi (stuffed cabbage leaves). This gave the production its distinct local flair, while still making it understandable for representatives of other cultures, who might not decode the Ukrainian cultural connotations, but would readily grasp the general symbolic meaning. The production also uncovered the darker overtones of cabbage symbolism. For instance, the Ukrainians regard this vegetable as a symbol of birth and healing (according to a well-known legend, new-born babies are found in cabbage; cabbage leaves are used for treating different traumas in traditional Ukrainian medicine), but in *Richard after Richard* its opposite meaning was highlighted—cutting cabbage was the act of killing, and cabbage heads might well be seen as severed human heads. The spectators sat close enough to the stage to smell the cabbage; cabbage juice, and even pieces of freshly-chopped vegetables, flew to the first rows, involving more than just the visual sense of the audience members and making the act of chopping even more reminiscent of a perverted execution. The actress crushed organic objects with man-made tools, thus creating some dramatic posthuman tension—Richard might be regarded both as a superhuman executioner, who decides on the fates of his sullen victims, and a madman, chopping vegetables while talking in iambic pentameter, in different languages. From a posthumanist perspective, Richard's frantic chopping might be loosely seen as a visual metaphor of present-day humanity's attitude to nature, or as a reflection on Ukraine's neglecting some burning environmental issues rising due to greed (irresponsible industrial overproduction, extensively growing crops that reduce soil quality), comparable to Richard's greed for power. Cabbage is also a jargon word for money and wealth—Richard is corrupt, he literally steals the precious lives of his victims, he strives for power and influence, but ended up miserably wriggling in a huge pile of cabbage chops, which is a far cry from a pile of gold, but may well be seen as such in the protagonist's insane mind.

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns first brought theatres on the brink of collapse, but then a boost of online broadcasts was observed, and Ukraine was no exception. For 2019 productions this was mainly a question of survival, as many of them had few chances to be watched after the first night. Among the most remarkable local Shakespeare-related premieres was all-male *Othello. Ukraine. Facebook* (dir. Stas Zhirkov) in Zoloti Vorota [Golden Gates] Theatre in Kyiv, which in 2020 could be booked to watch online. The performance material drew much attention to Shakespeare—it mentioned the

authorship question and popular facts about Shakespeare's legacy. However, during the first minutes of the production it became clear that Shakespeare was a mere clickbait to promote the show, which was a cabaret of political satire, personal anecdotes, dramatic confessions and painful reflections. The name of the show suggested its focusing on current Ukrainian problems—war, corruption, healthcare reform, political unrest, still vivid memories of the gruesome past (Stalin's Great Purge, Holodomor) etc., all those which are being debated about on Facebook. While watching this kaleidoscope of absurd and hilarious jokes, pointless talks, heartbreaking monologues about famine and war, we could not help but wonder where *Othello* could be found in this mess. Shakespeare's story was weaved into the fabric of the performance as fragments of the play (translated by Iryna Steshenko) recited between acts, and as a separate episode where squatting rogues recounted the plot of *Othello* as a common life story in the appropriate argot. The emphasis on Facebook as a platform on which the fate of the country seems to be determined created an impression that social media profiles successfully simulate people, exactly the way that this production simulated Shakespeare's tragedy. After we watched the production online, there was a Q&A session with the director and cast, where we asked directly about the choice of Shakespeare's play for the production, since it was not obvious. They explained that they were fascinated with the fact that Othello, being a foreigner, did so much for Venice, which was not appreciated by anyone. They paralleled the story of Othello to the career of Uliana Suprun, an American-born Ukrainian, who served as a Minister of Health from 2016 to 2019 and initiated healthcare reform, which caused a heavy, controversial debate in Ukraine. However, by 2020, in the middle of COVID-associated problems, the figure of Uliana Suprun had considerably faded, and this cornerstone of the production began to totter. It is quite predictable that *Othello. Ukraine. Facebook* will hardly survive another season, unless its creators find a more stable ground, rather than breaking news. In general, remarkable Shakespearean performances of the past decades in Ukraine have allowed a broad scope of interpretation, posthumanistic included. However, our nation is still in contemplation regarding an intended posthumanistic production that will go beyond preoccupation with post-Soviet anxieties.

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