REVIEW: POSTMODERN AND CLASSICAL – *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*

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ABSTRACT
The production of Shakespeare's classic play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Marcel Ţop at the State Theatre in Constanta (Premiere on 27 March, 2015) combines the original themes of the play with Brook's theory of empty space, but does not necessarily conform to them. In a manner that illustrates hippie and rock subculture and refers to social themes such as sexism, the production surprised and delighted the audience with contrasts (light versus darkness, imagination versus the real world), metaphors, and comic relief. The deeply modern approach may have discouraged some classical literature fans, but it is the novelty of the directorial tactic that makes the play truly classical.

KEYWORDS: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, production, Constanţa State Theatre, Hippie Movement

Introduction

The version of the Shakespeare's comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Marcel Ţop, at the Constanţa State Theatre (premiere 2015), was an event whose resonance needs to be revaluated in an increasingly global, continuous network of changes encompassing the local and global context. Constanța is a harbour at the Black Sea, surrounded by tourist resorts and holiday villages to the north and south. Although it does not possess the international prestige of certain European theatre projects and festivals of other Romanian cities, such as Bucharest, Craiova, Cluj or Iași, Constanța boasts a dramatic tradition spanning over seven decades. The permanent seasons featured a balanced repertory, including some creations of young stage directors. Marcel Ţop is a singular artist, labelled a "director-chameleon" (Ene) by the national press. It was said that he had a unique capacity to translate borders between the institutionalized and alternative theatre, or between opera and the underground. According to Ţop, theatre itself it is a form of "activism," an attitude which makes sense in Shakespeare's own language: "better to be than not to be, better to do than not do, better to risk than to not risk, regardless of the price you pay, regardless of the sacrifices you make, wilfully or without your permission. Better to fight than to flee or hide. And a very important thing, do not give up!" (Ţop, quoted in Ene). Shakespeare theatre does not depend on the authorship question; it relies on pure necessity, and the relation Shakespeare–theatre simply predicts that "people will come to see Shakespeare even in 3014" (Ene).

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Therefore, this production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was much more than a rebranding of the Constanţa State Theatre. The reasons for this production are based on a complex phenomenology, which not necessarily shifts the system, but aims to raise the energy of a small stage to join a non-canonical web of (always) young Shakespearean "activists," involved in a "private revolution, a revolution in individuals and diversity" (Stubbs, quoted in Perry 18). The production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Marcel Ţop, after the Romanian translation by George Topârceanu, was mounted in a colourful psychedelic framework (sets and costumes Anca Maria Cernea). This production paradoxically advocated that Shakespeare probably belonged to hyperspace, hosting "acid tests" and accelerating self-awareness and diversity. Our hypothesis is that this new type of activism-experimentalism shakes both the hermeneutics of language and the axioms of poststructuralist critique.

Firstly, Marcel Ţop relaunched the phenomenology of Shakespeare's text, making it interconnect with the carnivalesque world of the San Francisco Hippie Renaissance. Flying the flag of Freedom rock, the production was a complex polyphony of language, movement, lights, music, and rhythm—a game involving imagination, knowledge, and memory. When lights turned out, the musical background brought to life forgotten hits of the legendary *Summer of Love* (Monterrey Pop Festival, 1967), with Scott Mckenzie's rendition of *San Francisco*, Janis Joplin's *Me and Bobby Mc Gee*, and other voices, coming from the dark. They intermingled with flashes of memory involving John Lennon and Yoko Ono's Humane Revolution. The *Pyramus and Thisbe* play-within-the-play featured Paul McCartney as Pyramus, John Lenon, as Thisbe, Rex Harrison as Moonlight and Ringo Starr as Lion. This was an allusion to the 1964 TV adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, entitled *Around the Beatles*. Even closer in time, replicas from Steven Poliakoff's play *City Sugar* (1975)—a sensational event at the Bulandra Theatre in the 80s, directed by Florian Pittiș. Pittiș was a hipster himself, and a folk musician, actor and intellectual, who died prematurely. The death of so many young and brilliant (Beat) poets and musicians, however, who forged the countercultural movement, and the sex, drugs and rock-'nd-roll revolution, was not followed by a rebirth of the reader or the spectator. Yet it is beyond doubt that their dream, captured by mainstream media, has transformed our world.

From "a forest near Athens" to "a beach at Vama Veche"

Marcel Ţop changed the location of the plot from the fairy forest near Athens to the beach at Vama Veche. This is a real/imaginary place, a village situated on the Black Sea coast to the south, near the frontier with Bulgaria. During communism, Vama Veche had an aura of a countercultural place, famous for its nude beach and its camping spots on the beach—a refuge for intellectuals and artists. After 1990, when luxury holiday villas appeared and a modern tourist resort developed, vivid protests and NGOs lobbying to "Save Vama Veche" and its natural environment emerged. Their message was internationally promoted by the Stuffstock festival that drew

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crowds of people in the period 2003–2005 (10,000 people in 2003; 20,000 in 2004; and 40,000 in 2005). In a report headlined *Romanians Fight over the Future of the Nude Beach*, Allison Mutler featured the conflict by citing the Romanian philosopher Andrei Oișteanu, who had been coming there since 1967: "Poets and writers came here and cohabited with the fishermen" (Oișteanu, quoted in Mutler). According to Oișteanu, "It became a big colony of intellectual nudists that upset the communists." The recent gentrification of the area was labelled by Oișteanu as an example of "wild capitalism" (Oișteanu, quoted in Mutler).

The strong move towards intelligent activism is a chess-like play with an intelligent entity in a minefield. The intelligent entity could be either Shakespeare or other judges. This theatrical decision includes moves borrowed from Peter Brook's influential production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, fifty years ago, in which he doubled the characters of Theseus and Oberon. Marcel Ţop took the old theory of the Platonic shadow for granted, but he multiplied the risks. As a result, he transferred the play's gravity to Bottom, so that the character came to embody all contradictions and the ridicule of spectacular excess. The metamorphosis into a monster-like human figure did not seem to be a failure at all, since he became Titania's lover, and the queen of fairies worshipped him. So, the question was if he was a real monster, or maybe he was labelled as a monster by Oberon. On the other hand, Oberon looked like a mass-media profiler—an agent that was able to summon the kind of magic that could turn everything into its opposite. The director reconfigured the type by reassembling and playing with isotopies borrowed from the postmodern masculine body stereotype, based on the obsession of body workouts. Oberon was a complex figure emerging from a fully comical composition, but it was also a troubling character.

The production raised the following question: Was Bottom really transformed into an ass by the magic action of divine intervention (Puck's magic triggered by Oberon's request)? Or was he transformed into a ludicrous creature as a result of his obvious actions as a career builder? Otherwise, Shakespeare represents Bottom as someone who grasps all the roles of the cast, displaying a "monstrative" behaviour, according to Daniel Dayan's concept (19). Therefore, Bottom's metamorphosis into a stupid donkey was no longer the effect of the power-flower,[1] but was due to an unstoppable desire to become a star, to speculate *theatre-in-theatre* opportunities, using the stage as a "rocking device" to become famous. The audience may speculate that Titania's powerful attraction for Bottom was not so surprising. In contrast, the production proposed a reversed pattern, encoded in the subculture paradigm, which collided with the Oberon–Puck hierarchical relationship. In this production, the socially established hierarchies were reversed. The reversals of the Puck–Bottom interactions were operated in accordance with a

[1] In a corrosive article against the banking system, Margaret Bogenrief argues for the Occupy Wall Street Hippie movement as an action against the power establishment (Bogenrief). In a similar way, the production seems to suggest, the antidote of the love-in-idleness flower could be the power-flower of success.

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copy-paste mechanism. Similarly, a massive Puck not only contradicted the hermeneutic typology, but reduced the dynamics of the Hermia-Lysander-Helena-Demetrius attraction–rejection system.

This production suggested that reversibility did not represent a rebirth of authentic love, but a compromise with old and new allegories of order and establishment. While the world of Shakespeare's characters descended from the metaphysical to the contingent, and the romantic fantasy was reversed into parody, the spectator ascended to a higher form of knowledge. As a result of parody, the arrow springing out of the Cupid-Puck error, instead of targeting the love flower, reached the corrupt system of a sick Duke of Athens. In addition, the arrow of parody reached the old-fashioned behaviour of a father (Egeus), represented as a senile ex-general in a wheelchair. Marcel Țop used all the resources provided by modern theatre and a living, interactive, and intertextual web, by placing himself at the fracture point between temporalities, spaces, arguments, and typologies. Țop eloquently demonstrated the capacity of Shakespeare's text to connect what seemed hard—if not (logically) impossible—to connect, by just looking at the surface of dramatic discourse. In this postmodern production, the stage was populated with mixed, hybrid signs of the recent past. The myths of counterculture were juxtaposed to classical myths, and a complex phenomenology emerged over the course of three hours.

Dream particles and antiparticles clashed in this production, leaving behind lovers who suddenly switched between adoration and contempt; declining kings and heroes from the past; fabricated hipsters challenging to become superstars; and a theatre workshop transferred from the Athenian woods to the famous Romanian beach of Vama Veche village. In this place, similar to the neo-hippie message of harmony, tyrants, husbands and fathers were faced with a frolicsome lesson. This lecture was played, amusingly and energetically, by character entities and actors, who recalled not only romantic love, but a flexible profiling of others as a form of therapy for mad, sick, or frustrated heroes, leaders, and couples. Although the production relied on Brook's theory of empty space, the director's vision finely debated and distanced itself from its master and from Brook's interest for creating communities and erasing the line between stage and audience.

Marcel Țop dynamically connected the planes of the dream, but their meeting points were purely coincidental. The director retained invisible, but somehow perceptible, demarcations: the overlapping worlds were symbolically ritualized (the world above, the world below, the outside world, the inside world); and the focus moved from the stage towards an imaginary intersection of the classical text and real-life backgrounds. In this production, the intersection between the imaginary and real worlds was achieved through the interaction with the audience. Members of the audience were more or less specialized receptors of the message, including those who hesitated, misunderstood, rejected, or ignored the meanings of the theatrical event.

During the production, the stage-centre was the Constanta State Theatre, one of the centres of the globalized world, but also the hub of the (theatrical)

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universe. The psychedelic rock music recalled the city of San Francisco, an energetic music centre, where Janice Joplin electrified her screaming public in the '60s with hits such as *Mercedes Benz*, *Me and Bobby McGee*, *Kozmic Blues*, and others. In addition, the stage centre represented Woodstock and the festival *Woodstock: Three Days of Peace & Music* (1969). Some members of today's audience could still resonate with the hippie movement, and could see on stage the actors' dreams. In analogy with Bottom's transformation into a donkey attracting a queen's love, the audience could see why and how the hippie subculture was transformed into something else. After passing through film studios and dominating world and screen, the hippie movement was turned into an industry; the hippie subculture was metamorphosed from an alternative option to a dominant way of life (alien to most of us) into a representation of the movie industry establishment. Anca Maria Cernea's scenography framed this phenomenological approach by using two defining elements of the dream: the relationship between light and darkness, and the moon. The background projection opened the space towards the poetic night sky, usually associated to lovers and fairy tales. The moon cast its light on this imagined world and was reflected on the magician's cape and the foolish air of the actor who interpreted Moon. Titania's wings shone in the dark like a starry sky, recalling both the Art nouveau installations of Loïe Fuller, and nature, in contrast with the artificial style of Oberon's Broadway superstar persona.

The production was built on the basis of a dynamic concept of *space*, with unexpected changes of angles, devices, and perspectives, which challenged the audience without shocking them. This innovative concept of space helped the members of the audience to liberate themselves by laughing at the mirrored image of the Shakespearean dream. By the use of hippy actors who experimented in the middle of the forest, away from the world, the director proposed an escape from caricature, in a story where everybody learned to become someone or something else: an actor was the moon, another was the wall; a bearded man was the delicate Thisbe; a cowardly man transferred his insecurities to a lion; an uneducated hipster (Bottom), who pronounced the names of Hercules and Ninus incorrectly ("Hircule" and "Nini"), was redistributed as the protagonist, Pyramus, the play's title character. He became the preferred interlocutor of the director, Peter Quince, and Titania's lover. Puck was a breed of producer-delegate for Oberon—sent to pick the miraculous flower of non-violence, a lotus, the power flower, to end Titania's folly to love an ass, and to reset the confused feelings of the four couples (Titania–Oberon, Hermia–Lysander, Helena–Demetrius, and Theseus–Hyppolita).

Iulian Enache (Nick Bottom) contrasted the Shakespearean character with the stereotype of the rock star; he created a composition role that was rich in tonality, modern, tasteful, and inventive. Dana Dumitrescu (Titania) was an imposing, curvy figure, whose image could be interpreted as a castrating goddess. The actress interpreted the quarrel with Oberon (Act II, Scene1) rather as a scientist (or psychotherapist) would do: she assessed her conflicts with Oberon and highlighted the cause-effect laws in nature, rather than behaving as an angry wife reproaching marital infidelities. This interpretation enriched the character's image and expanded

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it. Dana Dumitrescu's Titania gave amplitude to feminine behaviour and raised the woman's status in terms of a principle of order; thus, the character gave a voice to a self-reflexive and responsible conscience. The queen dominated the space without making the playful fairies simply disappear. The fairies were interpreted by Ana Maria Ștefan as Petal and Cristina Oprean as Thistle; both actresses played double role and interpreted the fairies with quick, difficult changes of tone. Titania's rhythm and phrasing was more ample than Oberon's (Cosmin Mihale), whom she also dominated physically. It was inferred that this physical domination caused him to punish her by putting a spell on Titania (a higher spirit), who fell in love with a donkey (an inferior spirit). The contrast between the effeminate Oberon and the strong, massive Puck automatically launched the springs of comedy. Both actors took the Shakespearean text seriously; they tempered the caricature through a game that kept the conventions, and this contrast accelerated the situational comedy.

The two couples Hermia (Georgiana Băran)–Lysander (Remus Archip) and Helena (Luiza Martinescu)–Demetrius (Andu Axente) were involved in tense, loud, and confusing interactions, which oscillated between frustration, anger, disappointment, and obsession. The young actors' performance was filled with energy, which contaminated the stage and the audience, only to dissipate as quickly as it appeared. This demonstrated the instability of the clash of passions. The young actors interpreting the two couples were remarkable in themselves, but their acting also revealed the precise calibration of the comic mechanism. Actors Nicodim Ungureanu (Quince/Casting, Prologue), Iulian Enache (Nick Bottom/Pyramus), Cristina Oprean (Peter Groove/Lion), Florentin Roman (Martin Whistle/Thisbe), Ionuţ Alexandru (Melvin Muzzle/Moon), Andrei Cantaragiu (Hungry Damian /Wall) played the mechanicals in direct contrast with their condition as amateur actors. Hyppolita (Ana Maria Ștefan) was, according to the director's vision, a sort of a feminine personification of Caliban, something between a demon and a monster. This image functions as a sexist indicator. According to classical myth, the Amazons invaded Athens, then were defeated by Theseus, son of Egeus; therefore their queen could be interpreted as a monster. In this production, Egeus (Ionuț Alexandru) was a physically disabled ex-general in a wheelchair. Theseus (Dan Cojocaru) was an imposing, statuesque hero suffering from chronic coughing. These two figures suggested the authority crisis and the urgent need for new methods and paradigms to replace the whip-and-death threats of the old order.

The first performances of this production directed by Marcel Țop enjoyed a large audience, mostly consisting of youths of all ages, who were totally pleased with the play. This demonstrates the younger generation's direct access to the subtleties of the text and the liberties assumed by the director and actors in this version of the *Dream*. Those who did not expect a production based on youth subculture in the sacrosanct territory of a 'classical' author (as some still consider Shakespeare to be) may be less disappointed when faced with Liviu Ciulei's argument, according to which a successful modern production is by itself … classical.

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