

WHEN IT ALL ENDS WITH A PHOTO

Elena Angelova

The Wild Duck by **Henrik Ibsen**, translation from Norwegian **Antonia Buchukovska**, stage version of the play and director **Kris Sharkov**, stage design **Nikola Toromanov**, costumes **Nikola Toromanov, Ellis Veli**, music **Asen Avramov**, photography consultant **Nikolay Treyman**

Cast **Ana Papadopulu, Valentin Balabanov, Valentin Ganev, Vasil Iliev, Elena Telbis, Ivan Barnev, Iliana Kodjabasheva, Sava Dragunchev, Tsvetan Aleksiev**

National Theatre – Sofia, premiere 12th and 13th October 2018

Kris Sharkov's latest stage work *The Wild Duck* by Henrik Ibsen in the Chamber Hall of the National Theater *Ivan Vazov* offers an in-depth, analytical and exciting interpretation of the classical modern play and introduces the audience to an entirely contemporary viewpoint to it. Preserving the relations between the characters, Sharkov positions them in an easily comprehensible world in order to connect with the reality around us, while at the same time he offers a new, curious theatre language on the border between the minimalistic and the ecstatic.

In a gloomy and fast-paced, just as in modern times, aesthetics, Sharkov skillfully takes to the extreme the premonitions of self-analysis and self-observation: it turns out that digging into one's past hides unsuspected and insurmountable secrets that lead to a fatal end. The production follows the plot of the play and mingles modern intuitions and conclusions: in the first minutes, the audience reads, in a vid-

eo projection, the statement that everything we experience happens so that it can end with a photo. This painful insight for our times is true on too many levels, especially in the social networks and the vast internet: today, photography turns out to be the main "weapon" for rearranging life as we would like it to be, and this frequently creates false images of ourselves. Immersion into the image, and not in the actual present, turns out to be a fatal mistake not only for Ibsen's characters, but also for each modern person, especially in the times of digitalization and post-truth.

The photograph (or the image of a photo) is considered throughout the play as a key factor in our daily lives, but also on a deeper level as an instrument to perceive reality as if it is a reflex; as an act of evaluating, rather than actually experiencing the self and the world. This turns out to be a key and extremely pertinent problem which the play explores methodically as the plot progresses. Capturing the mo-

ment precisely through its documentation, and not through immersion in it, creates distance and artificiality, which replaces the human and the authentic being with the digitalized view of things.

This viewpoint constructs a new idea of reality that at the same time is an escape from it. The photo or “the image” is in fact an over-and-above interpretation of the play, and director Kris Sharkov problematizes all actions on stage related to it – vision and the inability to see reality; the search for the perfect frame and at the same time ignoring the present as it is; sealing of one notion of life and the inability to deal with it at the moment of realizing its falsity.

The photo is actually a manipulation of reality. The director and the artistic team of *The Wild Duck* make the most of the text in terms of its connection with the prob-

lem of our times, namely, our “blindness” to life and the inability to adapt to the moment of truth.

The plot of the play is in itself complex, compelling and emotionally engaging. A seemingly ideal artistic family with a very talented photographer deals with financial difficulties – the Ekdal family. They have connections to the Werle family who represent the rich upper class and often give receptions and parties, one of which marks the opening scene of the show.

In Sharkov’s interpretation, this reception takes place in the lobby of the National Theater, and the spectators watch it as if through a hidden video camera. In the role of secret observers, they witness a sophisticated, but also as real as possible party with all the postmodern informality emphasized despite the evening dress and the aristocratic atmosphere. These scenes



The Wild Duck

Photographer Stefan N. Shterev

draw the audience in, who examine the secret, inaccessible life of an imaginary business elite as if through a peephole. It is precisely the mystery and secrecy that are the driving factors of the play's development. The end of the plot reveals a dearly kept secret: that the daughter of Hialmar Ekdal, Hedvig Ekdal (Elena Telbis) is actually the biological daughter of Old Werle from a past love affair with her mother Gina (Ana Papadopulu). This ruins her husband's ideals. The irreconcilable photographer (Ivan Barnev) realizes that his whole life is built on lies.

However, going back to the beginning of the show, we find the keys for understanding the set design concept. Quite surprisingly, the video screening is interrupted by the appearance of Old Werle (Valentin Ganev) and his fiancée Bertha Sorby (Iliana Kodjabasheva), who step on-

to the stage as if to be alone and away from the party, which appears to continue somewhere outside the audience's field of vision.

It is at this moment that the actors enter the playing area space which is restricted not only to the stage, but rather on the contrary – all characters cross the audience's area repeatedly and consecutively reveal the architecture of the *mise-en-scène*. There are two stages connected with a bridge and in the course of the following acts, and as the action progresses, they are convincingly established as two rooms at the Ekdals' home.

The logic of the space is complex and carefully constructed, and the audience gradually gets used to its structure and idea. Modern and ingeniously deconstructed, the stage is a convincing representation of the play's world. The Ekdals'

Photographer Stefan N. Shterev



Ivan Barnev (Hialmar Ekdal) and Ana Papadopulu (Gina Ekdal)



Photographer Stefan N. Shterev

Tsvetan Aleksiev (Gregers Werle) and Elena Telbis (Hedvig Ekdal) in *The Wild Duck*

red room for developing photographs is represented with maximum accuracy not only in terms of light design, but also as a real work environment with a real laptop, with the image of a duck on the desktop. In the course of action, the bridge between the two stages is used also as a table and as general borderline where the characters experience their most intense emotional moments. In Kris Sharkov's highly detailed director's work, there are decisions that appear to be on the edge of the visible. A closer look brings these more hidden and less intrusive images (such as the duck on the desktop) as a contribution to the fuller immersion in the fabric of the show and construct a second visual layer with the constantly circling image-symbol of the semi-domesticated wild duck.

The performance is not devoid of bright acting achievements. Each of the actors

follows a clearly distinguishable line, sharpening the conflict in the play. Well-tempered, their performances as a whole could be characterized with restraint and frugality, which fit very well within the specific arrangement of the space and its scale. Since the audience often sees the actors' faces quite closely, their rather controlled expressions keep the focus not so much on empathizing with the drama, but on monitoring the rapid progress of the plot and the clockwork transitions and changes of situations.

The actors' play at certain moments is extremely detailed, as if intended for the big screen. Their composition into a near-cinematic aesthetics focuses not on the actors as an ensemble, but on each one's individual character manifestation: each character is present as different from the other and in a more personal way of

acting. Certain similarities could be found in the interpretations of Hjalmar Ekdal (Ivan Barnev) and Gregers Werle (Tsvetan Aleksiev) as rebels and individualists who reject the status quo and uncompromisingly stand against the elite, against the past, against untruth. The dramaturgical line Hjalmar-Gregers is littered with complicated turns and contradictions – starting as close friends and classmates with similar ideals in life, gradually Gregers settles not only in Hjalmar’s home as confidant and tenant, but also into his consciousness. It is Gregers that sows the suspicion that Hjalmar’s wife, Gina, has been cheating on him with Old Werle and that Hedvig is not their daughter. As the play develops, the interpretations of the two actors differ significantly. In Ivan Barnev’s interpretation we find the much more obvious, artistic and bare human rebellion, most directly connected to the riot of the idealist, who is incapable of compromise. He represents an artistic personality, not only as a photographer, but also as a rock star – a slightly anarchistic figure, but also a loving father who puts his family first; a multi-layered, complex character that takes a 180-degree turn at the end of the play.

One of the most convincing declarations of the character of Hjalmar can be found at the beginning of the show, in which Ivan Barnev performs a specially adapted version of *Photographic* by Depeche Mode on a microphone with electric guitar, accompanied by the actresses Telbis and Papadopulu on electronic drums. Starting as a speech of disagreement with Werle’s corrupted world, Hjalmar’s revolt naturally crystallizes into song. In this way, he impressively and vividly demonstrates his position towards the

world with noisy rock chords. In the environment of trust among those who are closest to him, Hjalmar’s gesture of disagreement goes beyond refusing to photograph rich people – his act of disobedience is, in fact, his quest to achieve something greater, verging on the work of genius. He is “not an ordinary photographer”, as he himself says, and this early statement carries the spark of strong individualism, a certain disappointment with reality and an almost fanatical obsession with the photographic project of his life, of which Gina is the main muse.

Ivan Barnev organically and convincingly brings his character to the extreme by the end of the show, when Hjalmar learns the truth about his family. He falls into an ecstatic rage verging on madness, in which his previous idealism takes a fatal turn. Successfully and articulately conducted, this challenging acting task completely suits the artistic talent of Barnev and he manages the transformation of his character with consistency and integrity.

On the other hand, in the interpretation of Gregers’s character by Tsvetan Aleksiev one finds a much darker and even unhuman take on the rebellious individualist. In his acting, he convincingly conveys a large dose of nonchalance driven by a sense of misunderstanding and disagreement with the others, but in a more covert and at times even insidious way. In the play, it is Gregers who conceives the idealistic idea to “liberate” Hjalmar from the false environment in which he lives; it is he who insists on the manifestation of absolute truth.

In decisive moments during the play, his lines are washed away in vocal expressions beyond the verbalized speech that mark the complex condition of not just

the character but the atmosphere as well, which permeates the situation. These vocal expressions take on the role of bearers of the accumulated contradiction and the pain about to be exteriorized. Aleksiev's performance in these performative, "apart" moments is a warning for the tragic ending each of the characters is facing. Even though these individual episodes are well conducted in terms of energy and accuracy of the presence as a whole, in the logic of Tsvetan Aleksiev's character's behavior some fluctuations can be pointed out. At times the nonchalance transforms into excessive chaos, which to some extent blurs the intelligibility of the text, and the rhythm of speaking and acting becomes slightly incoherent. However, in general, the balance between the acting presence of Barnev and Aleksiev is well achieved. The Gregers-Hialmar line is con-

vincing, full of surprising dynamics and depth.

The actresses in the female roles are also quite impressive – Iliana Kodjabasheva (Bertha), Elena Telbis (Hedvig) and Ana Papadopulu (Gina) demonstrate a sense of partnership and well-controlled characters. Without looming over the central characters on stage, they build a credible façade of apparent restraint, behind which, however, lies an intense inner life. Elena Telbis manages to play a childishly curious character, skillfully avoiding the thin line of naivety. Her role is actually that of the victim – prompted by Gregers to kill the duck, she commits suicide, ending her family's three-generation-long tragedy. However, Telbis's acting is completely free of sentimentalism: her presence is as specific and precise as possible, showing excessive maturity for the age of the character. The deci-



Photographer Stefan N. Shterev

Valentin Ganev (Old Werle) in *The Wild Duck*

sion to commit suicide comes as a shock and the tragedy is intensified by the untimely reaction and awareness of the others.

In Ana Papadopulu's interpretation, on the other hand, we see maturity in the performance, but also a very human and organic process of growing guilt within the character, which the actress seems to hide behind a mask of calm, before being provoked to make a fatal confession. One of the strongest and most influential moments in the show is between Papadopulu (Gina) and Barnev (Hjalmar), when each takes a photo of the other – as an act of sealing the moment, which replaces the words that are now impossible, after the secret has come out. In this action, we also see the photo as an over-interpretation of the play, capturing the final moment of reality, which documents its intensity and dramatic effect.

For the total presence of the photo as a sign and significance in the play, the impactful set design by Nikola Toromanov plays a decisive role, with the masterfully constructed installation with photos of Ana Papadopulu, which bring authenticity and mark the photographer's work process, creating a fatalistic world inhabited by her face.

The roles of Relling (Sava Dragunchev) and Molvik (Vasil Iliev) are also well developed as an eccentric stage couple that deepens the individualism line even further. Although they are to some extent characters bringing comic relief, cynicism, and extravagance to the grim plot, they combine a proclamation of truth with a sarcastic attitude – in this line of thought, Relling's character is played as more philosophical and dense, profound and masterfully controlled with a more unusual physical expression. Most of his lines actu-

ally manifest keys to understanding the meaning of the play: Relling is the only one who objectively proclaims the insight that if the average human is deprived of the life of lies, one's happiness will be destroyed. Somewhat a side commentator of the action, Relling's character is charged with the mission of being the bearer of truth in the play. Through his lines, he brings out impartial, universally valid messages that could save the characters from the trap of fatalism. Relling in the interpretation of Sava Dragunchev is presented as an unusual extrovert-philosopher, successfully defending the cynical but also objective position of his character.

In addition to the full-blooded acting presences, the performance as a whole relies heavily on the interrelationship between the individual elements, from which the viewer could put together separate meanings as in a puzzle. One of these connections is, for example, between the repeated action of Old Werle (Valentin Ganev) – dripping eye drops in his eyes, and the thick-rimmed glasses on Hedvig's face: an early, visible sign of their biological connection.

Another similar moment is the belated gift of Molvik (Vasil Iliev) to Hedvig – a rubber duck, which unexpectedly recalls the second semantic plan in the play, evoking the image of the wounded and half-tamed wild duck, which resonates as a symbol in each of the characters. However, this time it is presented in a ridiculous and even funny way. The image of the duck pops up unexpectedly in different projections and meanings and each time the director Kris Sharkov uses a different strategy to remind of its existence and to find an increasingly symbolic perspective on it. The duck remains

hidden from the main action and the audience learns and remembers its location at one of the exits at the bottom of the stage – from there it sometimes migrates in the characters' words as a strong connecting element among them, other times as a video projection associated with the action – the duck, like the photograph, is a constantly present subtext, a constantly intertwining metaphor in the complex and dramatic world of the characters. It emerges to remind us that, although saved, the duck, like the humans, lives (in) a world of artificiality and half-truth. The complex antagonism between artificiality and truth is well recreated through the other components of the production as well, such as the forest with artificial trees, in which Old Ekdal (Valentin Balabanov) hunts rabbits – in a short moment the actors place them on stage.

With *The Wild Duck*, Kris Sharkov definitely shows maturity and a resourceful and modern view to the stage space combining various tools of expression such as live songs and video projections with elements of documentary. In this aesthetic, he positions the spectators as invisible

witnesses as the action unfolds all around them.

The Wild Duck by Henrik Ibsen was first staged at the National Theatre in 1939 by director Nikolay Masalitinov. Almost 80 years later, we see a vividly visual, entirely contemporary version of the same play with a memorable, unconventional set design: Sharkov adds a coherent and necessary dose of contemporaneity to the iconic 1884 modern drama. The choice of this text itself is intriguing: this is the play that Ibsen wrote almost immediately after *An Enemy of the People*, which Sharkov staged in 2014 at the Drama and Puppet Theater – Pleven. This is his third staging of a text by Ibsen (the first one was *A Doll's House* in 2011 at the Drama Theatre – Plovdiv). With *The Wild Duck* seven years later, he definitely demonstrates a much denser, bolder, captivating and topical interpretation of the play.

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