

# A NEW READING OF SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET

Nikolay Iordanov

*Hamlet* by **William Shakespeare**, translation **Alexander Shurbanov**, director **Javor Gardev**, set and costume design **Nikola Toromanov, Daniela Oleg-Lyahova, Venelin Shurelov**, music **Kalin Nikolov**, choreography **Violeta Vitanova and Stanislav Genadiev**

Cast **Leonid Yovchev, Marius Kurkinski, Konstantin Stanchev, Svetlana Yancheva, Valentin Ganev, Hristo Petkov, Vesela Babinova, Ivan Yurukov, Ovanes Torosyan, Pavlin Petrunov, Aleksandar Uzunov, Zafir Radjab, Petko Venelinov, Daniel Peev, Deyan Angelov, Darin Angelov, Gergana Arnaudova, Yosif Shamli, Sava Dragunchev, Viktor Tanev, Stanislav Genadiev, Philip Milanov, Violeta Vitanova, Elena Gospodinova, Kire Gyorevski, Emil I. Markov, Plamen Peev, Teodor Elmazov, Kalin Yavorov**

National Theatre – Sofia, premiere 31<sup>st</sup> October 2012

Photographer Simon Varsano



Valentin Ganev (Polonius), Leonid Yovchev (Hamlet) and Vesela Babinova (Ophelia)

With the production of *Hamlet* at the National Theatre, Bulgarian stage practice proves its potential to release large-scale projects, in which the bright spectacularity and deep philosophical reflection on the most enigmatic text by Shakespeare can co-live. This is *Hamlet*, which carries the spirit of our current time and this is why the text comes to life through the musical lyric poetry by Adelle, the multimedia simultaneousness of the action and design of computer games. The performance unites the contemporary reading of the tragedy, based on the new translation by Alexander Shurbanov, with scenography techniques for potential expansion of the traditional stage-box (Japanese aisle in the viewing hall, a spinning circle, different levels of the stage podium, multimedia 3D environment).

However, Shakespeare's modernisation in this case is not to be understood only in terms of design, collage of highly current images of mass culture (Adelle, for instance, is also an iconic name for the new James Bond movie *Skyfall*, whose premiere almost coincided with the premiere of *Hamlet* at the National Theatre). No. What we must see in this choice is a production move which is trying to add contemporary sensitivity and reflectiveness in the behaviour of Shakespeare's characters. In this sense, Adelle's musical ballade *I set fire to the rain*, which carries the deep drama of a love that is doomed, is turned into a key for understanding what happens to Hamlet and Ophelia, and it becomes completely apparent to the young audience. Let's not forget that in *Hamlet* the disapproval of the world falls down mainly on the young. Since the beginning of the 60s Jan Kott saw Shakespeare as our contem-

porary<sup>1</sup> and *Hamlet* as a tragedy of the young people who had lost their fathers – Hamlet, Ophelia, Laertes; again at that moment Eric Bentley defines tragedy as a collapse of the youth under the old<sup>2</sup>. In Javor Gardev staging *Hamlet*, Ophelia, Laertes carry an utterly contemporary reflectiveness – they are presented as young people that we can see around today. The director reads Shakespeare's tragedy as a saga of destruction of two families – of Polonius, who causes his own death and the death of his two children, and of the old king Hamlet, whose spirit (played by an adolescent), seeking revenge for his suffering, drags his son, wife and brother beyond the grave.

The rain in Adelle's song literally becomes a physical environment on stage, the fire is in the passions that develop inside the characters. It is by reaching the suffering of the soul, the play, as though suddenly, opens up to the historical aspect of the time that has passed – from the Middle-age motives, used in Shakespeare's plot to the present days. We feel the superstitiousness of the Middle Ages, along with the melancholy of the late renaissance, the collapse of the Enlightenment faith in rationality, the romantic nostalgia over the lost dream of love, the existential loneliness of modernism, the postmodern irony for the world, the hyper-modern fear of the loss of the humane into a technology-driven society...

The genre of the play is extremely complex. In fact, the genre is a peculiar palimpsest in which over the tragedy of Shakespeare's poetry we have layers not

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<sup>1</sup> Kott, Jan. *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1964.

<sup>2</sup> Bentley, Eric. *The Life of the Drama*. NY: Atheneum, 1964.



Leonid Yovchev (Hamlet) and Vesela Babinova (Ophelia)

just of our perception of the modern tragic (in the spirit of Kierkegaard) and modern drama (from Maeterlinck to Camus), but also of the post-dramatic trials to experience the suffering of man from the end of the XX and the beginning of XXI century. In this production we could find the tragedy of the baroque opera (Claudius), the tragical farce (Hamlet, Polonius), the drama of the silence (Ophelia, Laertes, Gertrude), and figures of irony, parody, grotesque, but also of the ballade, the elegy, the poem...

Javor Gardev's production team, usually working in collaboration with Nikola Toromanov and Kalin Nikolov, but also with the artistic scenographer Daniela Oleg-Lyahova, associated mainly with the aesthetic of Sfumato Theatre Laboratory, attracted some significant figures from alternative stage forms: Venelin Shurelov – from performance art; Violeta Vitanova and Stanislav Genadiev – from contemporary

dance. The cast is also a collection of some of the most interesting names: actors from the National Theatre troupe (Valentin Ganev turns Polonius into one of the focal figures in the tragedy); actors established as artists at the Theatre workshop "Sfumato" (memorable roles of Svetlana Yancheva as Gertrude and of Hristo Petkov as Laertes); the unique and distinctive Marius Kurkinski (whose performance makes us think for the first time about Claudius's drama); the rising star from theatre academy Vesela Babinova (so far the bravest modernisation of Shakespeare's Ophelia on Bulgarian stage); Hamlet himself is entrusted to Leonid Yovchev, who owns the might and the talent to build this character-archetype (it is not a coincidence that the actor is sought after by the leading state theatres and by independent troupes alike). Thus *Hamlet* turns into a kind of summary of the best of the avant garde and mainstream of

Bulgarian theatre, an extraordinarily intricate mix of artistic and technological practices, of personal presence and group identification.

I watched the production twice: when it was first put on stage and then again at the very end of 2012; the first time from the stalls, the second one – from the second balcony. This way, by changing the time and the angle, I managed to confirm my initial impression of a grand artistic and technical effort (especially compared to the Bulgarian theatre standards). What is more, I saw that the performance develops not only as a compositional entity (in the first performances it naturally looked more like separate elements of different episodes), but also as acting of the different roles. Some of the published critiques of the production rightfully commented on the spoken word – in the first performances at times it sacrificed the overall meaning while aiming to be pronounced clearly and

fully; at other times the actor's diction itself appeared to be the problem. Now, without these problems being completely resolved, we see much more life behind the spoken words and real relationships on stage, rather than reciting verses. Sava Dragunchev is a consultant on Shakespeare's verse. Shakespeare's language comes to life the most in Marius Kurkinski's acting (Claudius) and Valentin Ganev (Polonius). With Leonid Yovchev (Hamlet) the speech is subject to a brighter physical expressiveness (obviously director's determination) and the actor now is a lot more confident and versatile in his means of expression. The more the game of life and death approaches its end, the more our solid notions of the nature of the characters change – Hamlet sometimes turns cruel and sardonic, and Claudius resonates the pain of a criminal passion for power. We can only regret that our contemporary busy way of life does not allow the luxury



Photographer Simon Varsano

Ovanes Torosyan (Rosencrantz), Leonid Yovchev (Hamlet) and Pavlin Petrunov (Guildenstern)

to follow the full development of such a complex performance and the achievements by the main actors in it in different periods of time.

Evidently, Alexander Shurbanov's translation itself (in the majority of public events his "rough-edges" were pointed out in comparison with the strive for a rhythmic speech in the translation by Valery Petrov) turns out to be a challenge for the actors and to some extent to the audience, who know by heart some of *Hamlet's* distinguished phrases. The play relies on the type of detachment from the established stereotypes for tragedy among the Bulgarian audience. Even the quote in the poster for the production "To be, or not to be, that is the question", converted from singular to plural in the Bulgarian translation (which can also be the true to original) surprises us because it replaces a deep existential question with a dilemma of

communal fate. And in this production the unbearable life of Hamlet is somehow carried as a burden by the other characters.

In the course of the action the actors-characters accept their fortune with pride. I believe that this is one of the greatest achievements in the Bulgarian stage interpretations of Shakespeare's texts yet: these destroyed by the whirlwind of the tragic events – Hamlet, Ophelia and Laertes, but also Claudius and Gertrude, as well as Polonius face death with stoicism and cold-bloodedness. Even the grotesque Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not try too hard to hide and have some kind of dignity. There are no attempts to play tricks or to dramatise pathetically. What we see is just a series of merciless fights between Man and Fate. In the implacable course of actions, the line between good and bad, between logical and absurd has disappeared. The only thing left is the human

Photographer Simon Varsano



Marius Kurkinski (Claudius) and Leonid Yovchev (Hamlet)

pain and as for the individual passions and ambitions – they are variations of the inevitable walk towards death. In the booklet for the production the photographs of the characters look like they have been sentenced to death: Hamlet, Gertrude and Claudius; Hamlet and Claudius; Ophelia; Claudius...

The spectator remains in the role of an anxious observer of the tragedy of human existence, similar to the characters who can see themselves in the play *The Mousetrap*. The scenographic decision and costumes, made by Venelin Shurelov especially for this stage, take us into the surreality of nightmares of the memory for the committed crime. The presentation itself of *The Mousetrap* is accomplished in an interesting manner, emphasising the principle “theatre within the theatre”, which is done by dance and video performance, created with a great deal of imagination and professionalism, so a new level of reality is outlined. The choreography and performance by Violeta Vitanova and Stanislav Genadiev leave their original footprint in this decision. This performative principle is affirmed with the appearance of the travelling theatre troupe, when Yosif Shamli’s impressive monologue gains so much energy that it turns into a short vocal performance.

Usually when it comes especially to emblematic classic texts, the theatre critique is likely to find parallels, hidden or obvious quotes from other stage productions. Unarguably these can be searched for in

this case too, but they need to be outside the Bulgarian context – for instance Peter Brook in a movie from 2002 on his production of *Hamlet* in the “Bouffes du Nord” Theatre in Paris chooses the famous British choreographer and dancer Akram Khan as leading in the travelling troupe. However, such parallels, apart from to prove the imminent intertextuality of each work of art, as well as our thinking in a global cultural context, in this case cannot explain one or another stage decision, as this performance creates its own art universe and each of its elements needs to be explored in its complexity. The last memorable Bulgarian production of *Hamlet*, met by a mix of admiration and denial, was by Lilia Abadzhieva in 1997 (Drama Theatre – Sliven, Summer Theatre University Association), but it was too different in terms of concept and acting. She then provoked the Bulgarian audience with her openly revealed postmodern style of quotes and parodies, becoming a boundary between her and the previous interpretation of Shakespeare’s text. Now, in 2012, Javor Gardev draws a different aesthetic line for the Bulgarian theatre between the theatrical memory of *Hamlet* and its new stage reading.

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