

Shakespeare under the Soviet Bloc

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Abstract

Under the Eastern European theatre, a number of allusions and inferences endeavored to raise the curtain of silence over the true character of totalitarian society. Situating Shakespeare within the ideological and cultural debates and conflicts of Eastern Europe, Shakespeare's plays were a politically subversive tool mirroring the absolutism of the state and the anxiety of the people namely in East Germany and the Soviet Bloc. Sometimes appropriating his works freely for the purpose, the new productions of Shakespeare were fraught with all kinds of contemporary allusions to political events subtly criticizing the political system, just to add a facet of "political Shakespeare".

This paper seeks to explore the appropriation of Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*, in Ukraine in an avant-gardist production by Les Kurbas, a play that has proved, uncommonly, responsive to the circumstances of a torn country. Les Kurbas's appropriation was appropriated to reflect the political turmoil and the general unease hovering over the country during the obscure days of the Second World War.

Key Words: Shakespeare, Eastern Europe, Soviet Bloc, appropriation, Les Kurbas's *Macbeth*.

Shakespeare has been appropriated to the ever-changing circumstances finding an echo in almost every sphere of the world thanks to the very elasticity of his plays and their ability to adapt to various situations. What is worth noting about Shakespeare's text is that they can be placed into other historical periods. "Classical plays can no longer remain in their historical frame. We [...] *fashion* them according to our own need, and in them we observe that which was not observed by the age in which the art work was created."¹ In the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Shakespeare's plays have been a potential, politically subversive tool against the emptiness and vulgarity of absolutism. In the eyes of the Polish director Jan Kott, theatre was crucially involved to play a paramount role in the midst of the genocide following the world war and theatre,

would have to play its part. It was impossible that in a world gone insane; the classics should remain inviolate loci of meaning. They had long been treated as icons of ultimate reconciliation [...] Look beneath *King Lear* and find Beckett's *Endgame* [...] Look beneath *Macbeth* and find a meaningless succession of treachery and slaughter, was the lesson, to be learnt from Eugene Ionesco's *Macbett*.²

In the early years of the Soviet period questions about the classics and the universality of Shakespeare in the Soviet repertoire was a major issue. The playwright of all times served as a corner stone by which a complex network of cultural and political issues was raised. Contemporary plays and new native plays were introduced on the Russian stage. Both foreign

¹ Grigori Kozintsev, *Shakespeare: Time and Conscience* (New York: Routledge, 1964), P.63.

² Quoted in Stanley W. Wells and Sarah Stanton, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage*, eds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), P. 217.

and native works which had to face a theatre ban under the tsarists and the classics, including Shakespeare, became associated with a cultural revival. For the Russian critic Sergei Dimanov, Shakespeare was a:

Fighter, who standing at the head of his class, sliced his way into life. Those of our writers who have a truly proletarian world-view must study Shakespeare so that our hatred can destroy the enemies of the socialist motherland, so that our love can be the purest, tenderest, kindest, so that our thoughts can take the world by storm and move humankind forward to the radiant future.³

Under Soviet Ukraine, Les Kurbas, whose name has been a dangerous one because of his revolutionary new theatre, was the first artist to introduce Shakespeare to the Ukrainian stage. During the 19th century, Shakespeare's works were prohibited from being performed or translated in Ukraine mainly for political reasons. The Tsarist decision rulers outlawed the Shakespeare canon and considered it subversive; something that turned Shakespeare literature into a secretly circulating body of work. It was not until the Ukrainian Revolution took place that the first Ukrainian theatre was firmly established in Kyiv, an event considered monumental in the Ukrainian cultural life. The outstanding Soviet Ukrainian stage and film director Les Kurbas considered staging the full works of Shakespeare though he was only allowed to perform four plays: *Romeo & Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*.⁴ Artistic Director of the Berezil and also a modernist playwright and actor, Les Kurbas's name was coined with an avant-gardist Soviet theatre whose foundation he established with unprecedented devices. Kurbas's use of a

³ Aleksandr Tikhonovich Parfenov and Joseph G. Price, *Russian Essays on Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, eds (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), P. 12.

⁴ Virilana Tkacz, *Les Kurbas and the Creation of a Ukrainian Avant-garde Theatre: The Early Years* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1983), P. 185.

wide series of tools and techniques involving acting analyses and questionnaires, are still considered as revolutionary techniques in the history of the Ukrainian theatre. These approaches have one single objective: studying the reaction of the audience to inquire about their approbation or disapproval of the staging method and the actors' performance.

Under the USSR regime, the communist party realized the potential effect of the theatre, in particular, among all other arts, including its potent threat and influence on the Ukrainian audiences in its attempt to raise consciousness about socialist realism. The Bolsheviks and later communists enacted tight rules on theatrical performances and more often than not, plays were subject to surveillance and even censorship. On many occasions, theatre directors were under offense, expulsion, detention, and execution. Theatre directors were expected to clearly demonstrate their ideological positions to ensure the subsistence of their companies and productions as well. Kurbas was convinced that the Ukrainian theatre needed the staging of world classics which should be accompanied with innovative techniques enabling the Ukrainian theatre to have its own distinctive 'voice'. Kurbas loved classics and their writers to adulation. What he admired most about writers such as, Sophocles and Shakespeare was their "good bones"⁵ and their dramaturgical effectiveness. As he observed: "classical dramaturgy is at base important and still useful to the present day in its structural aspects which have arisen out of a certain understanding of the laws of human reception. It is maximally educative".⁶

Ukraine's cultural history was frequently immersed in the Soviet experience and more recognized under the soviet rule. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its dissolution allowed for

⁵ Ibid., P. 12

⁶ Ibid., P. 91.

a new revision of the master narratives produced during that period. Shakespeare's influence on cultural politics and arts in Soviet Ukraine cannot pass unnoticed. Shakespeare had a prominent breakthrough in the Ukrainian theatre under the Soviet rule. A passionate of Shakespeare, Kurbas chose *Macbeth* to be performed to demonstrate that, by successfully staging a solemn classic, such as Shakespeare, the Ukrainian theatre could finally transcend its regionalism and acquire a universal dimension following the steps of their predecessors. Besides, by staging Shakespeare's plays, Kurbas aimed at demonstrating that classics could be still relevant for the present and that *Macbeth* was, "in harmony with our times".⁷ Because Shakespeare's *Macbeth* portrayed a thirst for influence and authority which parallels the strife that followed Lenin's death in January 1924,

Macbeth was very much 'in the air' in the first years after the Revolution. Banned primarily because of its regicide, the play seemed to be particularly congruent for the revolutionary and early soviet period. Its apparently antimonarchical nature and brutality seemed to be tailored for the times. As the first poet Mykola Bazhan remarked, *Macbeth* was a familiar power-hungry type walking down the streets of the Kyiv in the 1920s. That Kurbas's 1924 *Macbeth* was a metaphor for the times was obvious enough.⁸

Macbeth might be associated with the power hungry type of opportunist in the early soviet period. A re-examination of theoretical representation itself, Kurbas's 1924 Kyiv production was an experience of the way in which the classics corresponded with the spectators' responses and the director's activity, or as Makaryk defines it, "a cubist expressionist production which would reflect his beliefs about audience, actor, and art work".⁹ After the lifting of the tsarist censorship

⁷ Irene Rima Makaryk, *Shakespeare in the Undiscovered Bourn* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), P. 44.

⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

⁹ Ibid., P. 5.

following the Russian revolution, Kurbas devised techniques of alienation anticipating Brecht's whereby theoretical convention was questioned including the idea of the tragic hero.¹⁰ In a revolutionary socialist context, Kurbas did not seek to search into the inner recess of the self, nor with the unconscious motives when staging *Macbeth*. Instead of interpreting the play psychologically, he reduced *Macbeth* with every other character to a superficial stock type.

A brief synopsis of Kurbas's remarkable production of *Macbeth*, produced two months after the death of Lenin, was as Kurbas explained: "fractured by the prism of world-view"¹¹ that is, it became a totally modern, tragic-farcical, blood-soaked, cubist-expressionist Shakespeare; "One unlike any other seen before anywhere (East or West) at that time".¹² In Yuri Boboshko's words, this was "not a 'costume' drama, but a national tragedy full of contemporary meaning".¹³ The long-awaited 'Soviet Shakespeare' in the wake of the Soviet Cultural Revolution of 1928 was to reshape theatre life in Ukraine and throughout the Soviet Union. As Makaryk observes, "in the early Soviet period, Shakespeare and other classics filled the gap in the repertoire when deafening silence met reiterated, desperate calls for new playwrights, new Shakespeares of the Revolution".¹⁴ The production interrogated every single theatrical convention, from props to the idea of the tragic hero. Kurbas believed in the power of the theatre to embody vices and virtues, human whims, and aspirations.

¹⁰ Ibid., P. 78.

¹¹ Ibid., P. 75.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., P. 63.

¹⁴ Ibid., P. 5.

Les Kurbas frequently called for a return to the stage, the mother of all arts, what he calls, “a temple”.¹⁵ He would also solicit the spectators’ feedback on the staging of the plays encouraging, vividly, their comments on the performance and fostering them to be drawn into the action, to forget the self, and become co-creators of the production. In his all-encompassing efforts to grasp the audience’ reactions, Kurbas would sit among the spectators, examine their facial expressions while watching the performance, listen to their comments, and record them for later analysis. This was a common theatrical practice that would enable him to evaluate the spectator’s instant echo. Play-scripts were distributed around and the audience’s comments were noted in the text’s margins.

In his attempt to ensure a more effective reception for his plays, Kurbas proceeded to summon research committees, such as the “psycho-technical” committee with the intent to study the psychological responses of his audience and improve the new theatrical methods onstage. Kurbas’s was a precursor in his empirical methods and contribution to the Ukrainian stage. Basically, he worked to apprehend the structure of his audience, its mood, answers, and inclinations. As an avant-gardist, Kurbas rejected the traditional idea that stage performance is all about actors playing the script. Instead, he believed that there is more to bring to the theatre to ensure its strength. This could be achieved through a genuine combination of form and content and a close investigation of the spectator’s response to what is being performed. Kurbas compared art to “a communal activity”. It was, he noted, “that special form of a relationship among people in which they are made to feel, share, and experience one single worldview”.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid, P. 2.

¹⁶ Cited in Stephen Shkrandrij, *Stalinism in Soviet Ukraine* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2007), P. 154.

This comparison brought to the fore the notion of “theatre event” that came into Western performance criticism in late twentieth century; the idea that the actor and the audience shape an “inseparable entity and have to be understood and analysed as a mutual relationship”.¹⁷

Setting the stage for his performance of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, the Ukrainian stage designer Vadym Meller produced giant dazzling green screens of tissues on which huge red block letters indicated the setting of each scene. The screens had several functions; they would be either elevated or brought down according to the bell sound to refer to events in various parts of Scotland. From time to time, the screens would move at a slower pace to highlight the emotional responses of actors, sometimes to intensify the overall threatening atmosphere, or even to intervene in the act. Theatrical props that the spectators could see like parts of furniture, chairs, and throne were, like screens, lowered and raised when needed. Via such an unusual staging, Kurbas sought to create a peculiar image of character.¹⁸ During the Renaissance, the audience was used to actors playing more than a role classifying them into “good” and “evil”. With Kurbas’s new modes of stage production, each actor would appear to the audience at the right time to enact his or her own role, sometimes greeting the audience. Once the actor has fully played his role, he would leave the stage paving the way for the coming of new actors to the stage. In so doing, the audience would pay attention to the slightest movements onstage and to important events in the play. In revolutionizing the Ukrainian stage with his innovative techniques and tools, Kurbas used diverse devices to highlight the magnitude of evil in the play. By shedding light on the witches, wide shadows were reflected on the audience. It was directly to

¹⁷ Willmar Sauter, “Who Reacts When, How, and Upon What: From Audience Surveys to the Theatrical Event,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 12 (2002): 115.

¹⁸ Ibid.

these that Banquo and Macbeth spoke, an effect which seemed to widen the scope of evil to the real world of the spectators.¹⁹

Similarly, actors could approach the audience through major textual addition. There were three interludes in the staging of the play and the introduction of the figure of the Porter (renamed the Fool in Kurbas's production). When the Fool appeared for the last time before the play drew to an end at the time when Macduff emerged holding Macbeth's head, the scene was a turning point in Kurbas's performance. Being costumed as a bishop, actor Anburony Buchma performing the Fool's role, made a few steps forward to enthrone Malcom to the rhythms of an organ and the coarse sound of the harmonium. While trying to set the crown on Malcolm's head, a new claimant got closer, put an end to Malcolm's life and snatched the crown. Instantly, the bishop chanted: "there is no power, but from God". As the new king was about to arise, a new claimant assassinated him, and the ritual was repeated once gain and "Macbeth became a common unimaginative soldier and his wife a caricature of the new stereotype of the heroic soviet woman".²⁰ He also made "Duncan [...] a drunken fool whose death at first seemed, if not deserved, then at least not completely reprehensible".²¹

By criticizing contemporary politics and mocking Ukrainian monarchical rituals, Ukrainian aristocracy felt that "by making idiots of Duncan and his son", Kurbas "destroyed the whole play".²² Les Kurbas's avant-garde production in early 20th century Ukraine stressed "the

¹⁹ Ibid., P. 92.

²⁰ Nicholas Moshovakis, *Macbeth: New Critical Essays*, ed (London: Routledge, 2008), P. 89.

²¹ Makaryk, *Shakespeare in the Undiscovered Bourn*, PP. 94-5.

²² Ibid., P. 103.

universal complicity of society in acts of evils”²³ in the soviet theatre of the USSR. A fact made most clear when, in the end of the play the porter/fool, as a bishop, attempted to place the crown on Malcolm’s head. Yet, a new pretender came closer to Malcolm and snatched the crown from him. The production was genuinely received; the audience was seething to see a spectacle inspired from contemporary life, from the class struggle of the proletariat, from the period of the civil war, from revolutionary life, from real, everyday life, from the life of the Ukrainian people. Such a revolutionary production cost Les Kurbas his life when sentenced to Gulag in 1933 and then executed on Stalin’s orders in 1937, a date that calls back to memory thousands of other similar executions and “cleansing” of Ukrainian educational, cultural, and scientific institutions. In a failing attempt to draw the memory of what is considered to be a “subversive” playwright, Kurbas’s scripts, papers, films, materials, and diaries were all ruined and burnt. Worse than this, even his name was not allowed to be heard until Stalin passed away. Kurbas’s name came to be commemorated and brought to the surface again in the late 1980s with the fall of the USSR. His avant-gardist theatrical approach of innovative production, theatrical articles, and audience analyses is only now beginning to receive long-overdue attention.

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²³ Moshovakis, *Macbeth*, P. 103.

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