



FROM UBU REX WITH SCENES FROM MACBETH TO TWELFTH NIGHT OR SILVIU PURCĂRETE AT HIS BEST

Elena PALIȚĂ

“Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu-Jiu, Romania

Abstract: *THE ROMANIAN LITERATURE AND THEATER HAS ADOPTED AND ADAPTED THE BARD'S WORK UNDER INTERESTING AND ORIGINAL FORMS. THE ROMANIAN APPROACH TO HIS PLAYS DURING COMMUNISM OR THROUGH THE ORIGINAL ADAPTATIONS OF SILVIU PURCĂRETE, WE GET TO THE CONCLUSION THAT THE ENGLISH WRITER MANAGED TO GO BEYOND THE BORDERS OF OUR NATIONAL CULTURE. PARALLELS WITH THE ROMANIAN DICTATORIAL COUPLE ARE QUITE UNMISTAKABLE IN THE 95-YEAR-OLD UBU ROI, WITH ITS TALE OF A MARRIED COUPLE MURDEROUSLY USURPING A COUNTRY.*

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**Contact details
of the
author(s):** Email: elena.palita@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Paradoxically, performances in the first decade following the dramatic changes in Romania in 1989 reflect all the restrictions and frustrations dogging Romanian theatrical activity during half a century of Communism.

The version of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Rex* to which the Romanian director added scenes from *Macbeth*, as an inspired play-within-a-play, startles the audience with the words of a third couple – besides the Ubus and the Macbeths – who comment upon the happenings on stage with a cool gentility that sets everything in relief. Their words are perhaps the most resonant part of the play: 'The action takes place in Poland; that is to say nowhere. *Nowhere is everywhere, and, in the main, it is the country you are in right now.*' (Berceanu, 2000, p. 7) While it is common knowledge that Jarry used Shakespeare's tragedy as the inspiration for his play, it was his description of *Ubu Rex* which prompted Purcărete to combine the two plays. The equivocal image of the late Ceaușescu, the former Romanian Communist dictator, is perfectly represented in the director's mixing of the Jarry text with the Shakespearean one. The clown-like Ubu stands side by side with the bloody dictator Macbeth, and the result is as much a tragedy as a comedy.



Actually, the scenes from *Macbeth* begin as a court performance for the pair watching it. Obviously enough, Ubu – just like Claudius watching ‘The Mousetrap’ in *Hamlet* – is being treated to a fictionalised stage-recapitulation of his own crime. Calling for lights at the point where Macbeth is about to drive an axe into the skull of Duncan, Ubu cannot stop this drama from continuing to infiltrate his life. When his wife rummages in a treasure chest, out pops Lady Macbeth herself, in her mad mode. Still wielding his axe, Macbeth cavorts around the stage, his quarry now Ubu.

PURCĂRETE'S ROMANIAN REPRESENTATION

Parallels with the Romanian dictatorial couple are quite unmistakable in the 95-year-old *Ubu Roi*, with its tale of a married couple murderously usurping a country, destroying its villages, and holding tyrannous, bloody sway over it. The plot resemblance to *Macbeth* is also plain enough to explain why the director thought of interlacing the two plays, to the point where the characters start to swap lines. Pa and Ma Ubu are so much the latter-day heirs of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, that they actually become them: like – one cannot help feeling, as the nightmare escalates – the Ceaușescu.

The original Craiova production of the play shocked the audience who, during the intermission, unexpectedly found the foyers lit up by candlelight, and Macbeth and Lady Macbeth themselves watching everybody from glass cases. Then Ubu himself and his followers descended from the stage, sat down on their royal chairs, and watched excerpts from the *Macbeth* tragedy unfolding in front of their eyes. Irrespective of the variants devised by the director according to the material conditions offered by different theatres in Europe and elsewhere, the result of this original and unexpected play-within-a-play is a profoundly political show which, on the one hand, presents in general terms the obnoxious and corrupting character of power and, on the other, achieves obvious parallels with Romania's recent history. It goes without saying that, during Ceaușescu's rule, such a stage rendering would have been unacceptable, if not impossible.

This production is not an *Ubu Rex* according to the letter of the play-text. Purcărete introduces references to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, drawing parallels between these great evil-doers of literary history. Such parallels are, as a matter of fact, at hand: in every case, the ambitious wife incites her husband to regicide; the usurpation is followed by a host of monstrous atrocities; and, finally, the oppressed take up arms to put an end to terror. Such must have been Jarry's intention, as his own references to the Shakespearean play bear the traits of a parody. But the case is different with the Romanian director. He introduces Ubu as if he were Macbeth and, as the play proceeds, more Shakespearean scenes are introduced: the Weird Sisters, Duncan's killing, Lady Macbeth's monologue, the besieging of Dunsinane Castle. Meanwhile the Ubus sit there, watching the play within their own play. Finally, the couple take over fragments of the Shakespearean text: the two plays interpenetrate totally.

There are no proper sets on the stage: just a few metallic structures, or sometimes only some scaffolding, perhaps covered with cloths that are pushed to and fro. At a certain moment, Ubu sits on a high dais, just as Ceaușescu used to sit on the balcony of the Communist Party headquarters in Bucharest less than a decade before. He eulogises the classless society, the nobility having been liquidated by the leader's orders. He buys the mob's favours with money practically stolen from them, standing behind a conference table just like the late dictator conducting a meeting of the Politburo, and urging the people to procreation in accord with the same model. As Colin Donald says in his review of the Edinburgh performance of the play,

“[Purcărete] has artfully confused the story of the grotesque king and his obscene wife with the scenes from *Macbeth* not so much to add weight to the former, but to point up the absurd blankness of *Macbeth*'s lust for ever bigger helpings of power. Anyway, it is



dangerous to interpret what the Bard means to Eastern Europeans – he is compared, at one stage, to the chaotic king himself. In another deft Shakespearean parallel, Ubu ... evacuates the auditorium screaming vengeance.” (Purcărete, 1991, p. 18)

In this adaptation Ubu and his wife meet a fate not unlike the Macbeths', except that the Romanian director instantly resurrects them after a fashion. Revealed at the end in upright, satin-lined coffins, they give us a fatuous, knowing smile. Don't discount us yet, these discarded dictators could be saying. It is a concluding image to which the events of yesteryear have given an unsettling topicality. The performance, to cite British reviewer Michael Ratcliffe, 'drew its power from the Ceaușescu nightmare and its exuberance from the joy of having woken up alive'. (The joy of waking up alive, 1991)

In Silviu Purcărete's performances, the deciphering of the story comes from the game, as he starts from an exterior mood that he brings to the text and infiltrates into the text. Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night or What You Will* or Purcărete's *What You Will, or the Night After the Feast* offers the director a key to modernity, or even post-modernity, as an attitude – a disintegration in an anarchical ebb and flow, where life is similar to fiction. The borders are indefinite, everything seems to overlap, things become imbued with the print of the others, and their separation is difficult. It is the mood of the 'night after the feast', when the spell is broken, the mirage disappears. What remains is the trace of the magical moment which has just passed by, without capturing it in a form.

To the director, the stage is a multiple world, the characters he creates are almost Gargantua-like by their carnality given by the co-planarity of spaces. All the heroes are present, and the text acts as a limelight that brings the groups to life; some of them participate by watching, others are deeply immersed in their own action. The dimension is not only horizontal, but also vertical: Malvolio is blocked in a suspended container, Olivia glides up and down in a presumed flight of love.

Two years after the premiere, Silviu Purcărete's *Night* seems to have achieved the perfect harmony between the comic and the tragic, its moments of course comedy alternating with the elegiac ones, according to the two tunes played live by the pianist. Overwhelming is the state of exhaustion, of a certain wear that does not only belong to the endless winter holiday season Shakespeare had in mind, but also to an existential agony, a nausea, remembering us of Sartre. Orsino, Duke of Illyria, is hopelessly laid down with his hopeless love for Countess Olivia who, in her turn, pines for a different kind of love discovered in the femininity of Cesario, Orsino's messenger. Even the jolly group led by Sir Toby Belch – comprised of Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Feste, the clown, and Maria – are completely worn out after eleven nights of drunkenness.

Anyway, we know that we are at the theatre, attending a performance: the whole cast is on stage, from the very beginning to the end. There are no enters or exits, only enters and exits to/from the centre of attention. Nevertheless, we are not watching a 'group theatre' – so often practiced by Silviu Purcărete – because the characters never plunge into the anonymity of the group, and have a very strong theatrical personality. Perhaps, more than in other occasions, the actors are rendered valuable in a most spectacular manner.

One important detail about this amazing production is that the audience are seated on the stage, in the close proximity of the actors. The stage is open. There is no curtain, just several wardrobes and bookcases. Further on one can see the cloakroom – a space usually hidden to the theatre-goers. There are also a piano, a fridge, a gas cooker – all making up a surrealist painting in which all the characters move from one room to the other. Doors open, and the bookcases become rooms communicating in the dark, in the mournful atmosphere of Illyria.

Silviu Purcărete's play lives under the sign of the mirror. To the right of the stage, there is the specular horizon, projecting our being – so full of contradictions and censored obsessions – to an



unknown realm, an extension of the dream, the search and completion of the self. Death and wedding, face and mask, Viola is Olivia's name in the mirror, and she feels how her own being opens, reflected in the whole that unites the nocturnal to the diurnal register, at a certain time, at the end of the feast.

Somewhere, on the precincts of the National Theatre of Craiova, the director found some locked bookcases which had not been opened for a long time. He had the inspiration to remove the books and thus transform them in translucent, reflecting bodies, suitable for the background of Illyria in Shakespeare's play. The book/show cases are turned into mobile, translucent partitions of the performance space, thus suggesting the indistinct delimitation and the ambiguities of the identities. The garden dwarves on top of the bookcases might suggest the refuge of the souls in the missing books.

With two reflecting panels located to the right of the stage, the director creates fascinating moments of theatre, at the very centre of which is the charming and inaccessible Olivia, whom he turns into a bird, or a person endowed with the gift of levitation who rises to heaven and disappears when the world proves too boring to her, leaving behind a trace of perfume. She is half half-woman and half-image in a mirror, a fragile femininity, arrived from the world beyond and who – for a good part of her appearance – is covered by a most fateful shroud.

For those who know the play, or have seen other stage versions as well, everything looks different and full of new meanings. Feste, the clown, takes part in the general joy of the group with an inward look, interrupting the course of the comic action with his bitter meditations on love, death, and madness. Sir Toby Belch is a copious creation of jovial rudeness, while Sir Andrew exhibits an expression of a charming foolishness. Malvolio, victim of the flat pranks of the jolly fellows at Olivia's court, is severe and ridiculous only in comparison with the others' euphoria.

Determined not to idealize anything, the director chooses for Duke Orsino a counter-cast, finding the ideal actor for the anti-illusion of the whole performance: an elderly, overweight lover whom Olivia had all the reasons in the world to reject, while Shakespeare had done his best to convince us to the contrary.

Not the director, but the scenographer of the play – the same Silviu Purcarete – speaks about the new interpretation of the Shakespearean text. He despises the symmetries, volumes and harmonies, being preoccupied with the final refrain of Fieste the clown, who suddenly turns a comedy into a sad play, with his profoundly philosophical meditations on the passing of time and the merciless ages of man who suffers, rejoices, and drinks because 'the rain it raineth every day'. This heavy rain neutralised by a severe thirst leads Purcarete to the idea of a convex roofing above the stage, a roof of the world, on which a real rain pours, with thunders and lightnings, and eaves overflowing. For the rest, a few used bookcases, the glass often broken, allowing us to peep at the burlesque adventures of the characters more curiously than when they are on the open stage.

According to Purcarete, "the play is about the power and obnoxiousness of fantasy, about its poisoning power; about the ambiguity of sexes and individuals, of space and time. Madness, cross-dressing, quiproquo – here are a few of the themes artistically expressed in the performance. We have no idea where the artist's fantasy ends and where the domain of the morbid starts. In the particular case of this play, madness is related to the ambiguity of borders, and the lack of precision of the contours. Moreover, even sexuality is ambiguous – love is viewed both as homoerotic and as heteroerotic."

Here are the director's words again: "Here are all the performances I have ever directed, the great majority of the actors I worked with; it is a succession of mirrors distorted by nostalgia, a melancholy look upon the time I spent here, with all the feelings and fragrances that have existed ever since..." (Berceanu, 2004, p.10)



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