

SHAKESPEARE'S TYRANTS: FROM TEXT TO STAGE

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present article is to study the transformation, which Shakespeare's text undergoes from original into translation and finally for the stage adaptation; namely the interpretation of Shakespeare's famous tyrants (Richard III, Claudius, King Lear, Julius Caesar) by an acclaimed Georgian theatre director Robert Sturua (b. 1938) at The Rustaveli Theatre, Tbilisi.

For this purpose four plays by Shakespeare "King Lear", "Richard III", "Hamlet" and "Julius Caesar" have been studied. A comparative analysis of the original text and the translation as well as the text of the staged performance reveals the main tendencies apparent in the interpretation. The scenic adaptations of the Shakespeare's plays show that Shakespeare's highly suggestive text often becomes a means to discuss political problems and represent the currents issues of the Soviet and Post-Soviet period: the dictatorial state, the perversion of power. At the same time stage directing endeavours to represent these problems as universal. The article deals with the examples of transformation, interesting interpretations and techniques that Robert Sturua use to represent these characters.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare, Translation, Georgia, Machabeli, Sturua

INTRODUCTION

The changes, which any text undergoes when it is translated into another language and finally when it is adapted for the stage gives an interesting insight not only into the cultural differences between the original and the target languages and culture, but also reveals political, social and psychological issues, which make this text sound interesting for the modern audiences. Shakespeare's plays prove to be of particular interest in this context. His highly suggestive text which is open to various interpretations, as well as his characters, particularly his ingenious portrayals of tyrants with their immense strive and greed for power provide a fertile ground to explore eternal problems and at the same time represent current problems characteristic to the Soviet and Post-Soviet states.

At a gathering of the International Shakespeare Association in Prague in 2011, where Robert Sturua participated in the conversation about theatre production "In the Cold War Years" together with two other theatre directors VlastaGallerová (of the Kolowrat Theatre in Prague), KarelKřiz (of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague), all three participants agreed that Shakespeare's text is an effective vehicle for protest and for expressing a biting critique of authoritarian power(Young 2017). However, needless to say that expressing a protest against the totalitarian state, however noble it is, does not make itself a good production. Thus, the present article will attempt to show how Sturua's fresh reading

of the text is joined with the means of expression to create an outstanding interpretation of Shakespeare's plays.

From Original into Translation

The first stage of the research was a comparative study of Shakespeare's four plays ("King Lear", "Richard III", "Hamlet" and "Julius Caesar") and translations into Georgian by a famous translator Ivane Machabeli. The analysis shows that the translator closely follows Shakespeare's text and in most cases manages to create a text which renders both the meaning and the beauty of the original in the target language. However, from time to time Machabeli attempts to adapt the text to the Georgian culture, so as to make Shakespeare's world more easily accessible to the reader and at the same time to increase the effect of a negative connotation particularly when describing a tyrant. For example, in *Julius Caesar* Cassius speaks of Caesar:

Like a Colossus, and we petty men

Walk under his huge legs and peep about –

In Georgian translation the word Colossus is replaced by the word "Devi", a gigantic mythical creature in Georgian folklore where it is always represented as a cruel, despotic creature. Thus, Cassius's description of Caesar acquires a negative connotation which it did not have in the original. In "Richard III" Anna calls Gloucester 'basilisk' and 'toad' but in Georgian text these words are substituted by 'asp' and 'gecko' which have a more negative connotation in Georgian than basilisk or toad. Hamlet's words uttered when he hears from the Ghost the truth about his father's death: "O my prophetic soul! My uncle!" is translated into Georgian as "O my prophetic soul! That snake was my uncle!". (Act I, scene IV). In "Richard III" the phrase "all their ministers attend on him" in the translation sounds: "all their ministers attend on this villain." All the examples given above show that the tendency apparent in the translations is the translator's wish to exaggerate the characters' wiles by adding some words and using more dysphemisms than in the original.

Another tendency apparent in the Georgian translations is to find relevant Georgian idioms and proverbs in the target language with very little cultural similarity with English. It is well-known that Shakespeare's text is rich in idiom which makes it difficult to recreate in another language, particularly as some proverbs cannot be rendered literally because they tend to have a figurative image meaning. So the translator not only needs to must understand this figurative meaning, but to find an equivalent. The method used by Machabeli makes the text sound more authentic in the target language as in most cases he manages to convey not only the meaning but also the connotative implications of Shakespeare's idioms. The usage of Georgian idiomatic language is done so subtly that it does not distort the original. The only exception is the translation of "King Lear" (together with a famous Georgian writer Ilya Chavchavadze). In the translation King Lear sounds more like a Georgian due to the excessive usage of Georgian idioms and proverbs. Besides, the translators add some aggressive and negative words and phrases to the text, particularly to Lear's monologues as if to strengthen the impression, which in fact leads to the distortion of the economy and beauty of the original text.

STAGE INTERPRETATION

Georgian theatre director Robert Sturua who has directed seventeen of Shakespeare's plays is renowned for his daring and innovative interpretation of Shakespeare's text. When he is asked about his approach to Shakespeare's text he usually points out that his practices are those used by Shakespeare himself. It is well-known that Shakespeare used existing sources for his purposes and the Elizabethan theatre is known to be cutting and arranging texts during rehearsals. Thus,

Sturua sees his directing as a mediator between Shakespeare's text and the audience, as a means to accentuate those contexts which is hidden in the text. To achieve his goal Sturua has been experimenting with various means of expression: music, choreography, make up, costumes, stage design. On this way, he is one of most daring and innovative directors who established his own tradition of metaphoric theatricality which is characterized by extremely daring, frequently outlandish devices which introduce farce and melodrama in Shakespeare's tragedies.

"Richard III" (1979) was the first production which brought him international acclaim at Edinburgh Festival and London Roundhouse, the UK. Shakespeare's deformed yet charismatic Richard, Duke of Gloucester (acted by R. Tchkhikvadze), is portrayed as a dictator of any time thus suggesting it as a metaphor for the cyclical nature of despotism. Sturua's "Richard" does not take place in a specific reality. Metaphoric, minimalist scene design, costumes belonging to different epochs, even props and make up (masks and a complex, heavy make-up which resemble masks), choreographic buffoonery and music (ragtime, classical: Bach, Kancheli, rock'n'roll) together create a striking performance where carnival (which has deep roots in Georgian medieval theatre) is combined with Brecht's Epic Theatre. (See: Gelashvili 2012).

In creating "Richard III" Sturua uses Brecht's method of alienation, an innovative technique which serves to create a certain distancing effect between the actor and the role and stresses the fictive nature of the performance as if illustrating Shakespeare's famous metaphor about the world as stage. Instead of the "experiencing", "becoming" Richard Gloucester Ramaz Tchkhikvadze acted as Richard, who is charismatic, funny and cynical and extremely dangerous because of these traits. As V. Ivanov remarked, "Such a treatment lent the play a captivating quality and made it sound extremely topical" (Ivanov 1987: 29).

"Richard III" was soon followed by "King Lear" (1987), a highly politicized rendering of the play, which presented Shakespeare's tragedy as a parable about the destructive power of despotism. Once again, as in "Richard III" (both roles were acted by R. Tchkhikvadze) the performance manages to combine the austere atmosphere of the regime (everything seems rigidly restrained and unified in style, taste, manner, etc.) with grotesque, sometimes even burlesque treatment of the subject. As M. Gussow remarked in his review: "Even while conveying the bleakness of "King Lear" (and any comparisons to the Soviet Union under Stalin are there for the audience to make), the actors unearth comedy. At moments, Mr. Tchkhikvadze is disarmingly funny, like the cartoon Little King or a despotic Hollywood tycoon who can and will humiliate anyone he pleases. Anger suddenly replacing affection, he strikes Cordelia as if she were an unruly pet, then he embraces her - and she reciprocates." (Gussow 1990). He also compared Georgian "King Lear" with such outstanding works as Ingmar Bergman's "Hamlet" and Akira Kurosawa's film adaptations of Shakespeare, saying that Mr. Sturua's "King Lear" transcends language barriers."

The performance has a most striking finale: King Lear dragging dead Cordelia's body. There is nobody on the stage except him. Shakespeare's ending which leaves a hope that either Albany (in the Quarto version) or Edgar (in the Folio version) would become a king is dismissed. Lear "remains the only man alive, forced to face his own self-victimization and the destruction of his kingdom. With a shudder, the setting - the theatre as scenery - begins to fall apart. As expressed by Mr. Sturua, the conclusion of "King Lear" is a fearful vision of the apocalypse." (Gussow 1990). In his interview Sturua remarked that while working on *Lear* he was greatly influenced by Andrei Amalrik's book *Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?* The performance premiered in 1987. A couple of years later the Soviet Union collapsed.

bringing about not only the end of the totalitarian regime and independence of the states, but also economic and political chaos which was as if predicted in the finale of “King Lear”.

Two other Shakespeare plays discussed in the paper were staged already in the post-Soviet period. However, Robert Sturua views the problem of power just as vital nowadays. The expectations of a new democratic development after the fall of the Soviet Regime seems to have given way to a disillusionment based on the understanding that greed for power is in human nature and persists long after the collapse of the totalitarian state. All plays staged by Sturua in the 21st century are marked with this pessimistic worldview. Among them: “Hamlet”, “Julius Caesar” and particularly his true masterpiece “The Tempest” staged in Russia with Alexander Kalyagin as Prospero.

Hamlet has haunted Sturua for years. During the Soviet period the protagonist had become a symbol of an intellectual ‘taking arms’ against the tyrannical regime. This quality of the play was well-recognized not only by intelligentsia, but by the regime as well. It is well-known how Stalin hated the play and from early 30s until his death it is virtually impossible to find the play on the Soviet stage.

Sturua directed “Hamlet” several times on various stages (The Rustaveli Theatre, Tbilisi, in 2001 and in 2006; The Riverside Studio, London, 1986, Theatre ‘Satiricon’, Moscow, 1998; Ankara, Turkey, 2004) every time producing a different reading of the text. What unites all of them is the persistent usage of Shakespeare’s metaphor “All the world is a stage” which is apparent in Sturua’s every, even non-Shakespeare production. No doubt it is one of the central metaphors in “Hamlet”, where all characters set up traps for others. As it is all other productions by Sturua Shakespeare’s text is reduced to its backbone. The Tbilisi performance of *Hamlet* is only in two acts with the interval which falls on the end of the mousetrap, with Claudius’s words asking for light. Claudius at the same time acts as Lucianus the Poisoner in the ‘Murder of Gonzago’. It is noteworthy that in Riverside production in London Sturua suggests a different version of doubling with David Burke as old Hamlet and Claudius: as the one, he shuffles on more like an old tramp than a ghost and sneaks a cup of water from a barrel; as the other, he models a suit Comrade Stalin might have admired. (Taylor 1992).

“Julius Caesar” (2015) is so far the latest Shakespeare production by R. Sturua. Staged already in the post-soviet period it is a postmodern play in which farce and melodrama become part of the carnival. Time and space is dislocated: the setting seems to be an old theatre or cinema (evoking once again the world-stage metaphor), which is hard to locate either in Rome or in Chicago with its mafia and clans. Modern music by Gershwin and Kancheli, allusions to various other theatrical productions and texts, create a performance where the real and the phantasmagorical combine in a postmodern simulacrum of Shakespeare’s tragedy. The Caesar himself has nothing of the grand dictator about himself: more like an old buffoon surrounded by a gang of political parvenus and sycophants. It is the reality which Caesar himself had created: the society where everybody wants to be Caesar and where nobody wants to take any responsibility. The script of “Julius Caesar” is drastically shortened as all other Shakespeare’s texts. However there is one major difference: this performance finishes with Caesar’s death, i.e. literally in the middle of the play. Consequently there is neither famous speech by Brutus, nor Mark Antony’s oratory masterpiece. Finally, there is no final monologue by Mark Antony, which honours Brutus as the best Roman of them all and makes us realize that Brutus’s mistake was to impose his sense of honour to the state and society with no sense of honour.

In Sturua’s interpretation the performance ends with an open end which questions the possibility of a democracy and views strive and greed for power embedded in the society which has no responsibility. Caesar is murdered, however

what lies ahead will surely be a new fight over the power. The final replica 'it's wonderful, isn't it?' pronounced by the minor character who acts as a commentator (combining in itself the function of a fool and a chorus) throughout the whole performance sounds extremely ironical.

Talking about the final scene of "Julius Caesar", it is necessary to add that all performances staged by Robert Sturua have a metaphoric end. An interesting example of this is the final scene of *Richard III*, which differs greatly from Shakespeare's text where the future Tudor monarch Henry III gives a long optimistic monologue about the future of the state. However, in Sturua's interpretation "The final scene of the performance suggests that power hunger is embedded in the body politic. In Sturua's interpretation Henry VII does utter some words cherishing hope, however, it is followed by his ascend on the scaffolding with the crown in his hands. The manner in which he greedily places the crown on his head bears some resemblance with the enthronement scene of Richard and tentatively suggests that tyranny, far from being expunged by Richard's death, simply continues in other forms. Everything in the final scene serves to reinforce this idea: the figures who are present on stage are the jester and Margaret closely watching the future king. The jester's questioning face mockingly leaves the performance with an open end. Of no less importance is the music which together with tragic and sinister tunes comprises frivolous ragtime runs as a leitmotif of the performance accompanies Richmond's access to power, thus questioning victory of good over evil." (Gelashvili 2012).

There is a gap of nearly forty years between the production of "Richard III" and "Julius Caesar". These forty years saw dramatic changes like the collapse of the Soviet Regime, End of Cold War, development of new, independent countries from the former Soviet states. However, a study of the Rustaveli Theatre productions clearly shows that the problem of power hunger is still an acute issue in the post-Soviet Georgia.

CONCLUSIONS

The comparative study Shakespeare's tyrants in the original, its translation into Georgian and finally its adaptation for the stage by stage director R. Sturua, clearly shows that while the translator (I. Machabeli) endeavours to follow the original closely and brings in only some minor changes to make the text more accessibly for the readers with a different cultural background, stage adaptations by Robert Sturua use Shakespeare's text freely, offering a fresh reading and an interpretation which corresponds to the problems of the Soviet and post-Soviet societies and at the same time creates a topical image of a tyrant which is timeless.

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