

## Theatre Reviews

### ***The Tempest*. Dir. Janice Honeyman. The Baxter Theatre Centre (Cape Town, South Africa) and the Royal Shakespeare Company (Stratford-upon-Avon, United Kingdom).**

Reviewed by Coen Heijes<sup>a</sup>

#### **The Multiple Faces of a Multicultural Society**

The last twenty lines of *The Tempest* are spoken by Prospero. They are an epilogue in which he asks the audience both for applause and for forgiveness in order to set him, the actor, free. The stage directions indicate that Prospero is by now alone on stage, all the other characters having left in the course of scene 5.1. In this production, however, Caliban re-appears on stage during the epilogue and confronts Prospero centre stage in a tête-à-tête as Prospero speaks his last two lines: “As you from crimes would pardoned be, / Let your indulgence set me free” (Epilogue 19-20). As Prospero leaves the stage, Caliban, throwing off the two crutches he has been leaning on all through the performance, is the last visual image before the lights black out.

It is a tantalizing end to this production: In what ways is Caliban to set Prospero free? What kind of indulgence does Prospero ask for? What role-reversal is taking place and why? It is also a fitting end, seeing that the production focuses to a large extent on the relation between Caliban and Prospero and builds on the (post-) colonial interpretation of *The Tempest*, which is still so very relevant to the current debate on identities within our multicultural society. Prospero is played by Antony Sher and Caliban by John Kani, both multiple award-winning actors, in this production performed by an all South-African cast and directed by the South-African Janice Honeyman in a co-production between the RSC and the Baxter Theatre Centre, Cape Town.

Caliban in this production is not portrayed in a barbarian or a monstrous appearance, but is set down as a rather dignified, if slightly bitter and resentful, older man, which is doubtlessly

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strengthened by the excellent and controlled acting of John Kani. He walks with two crutches, somewhat bowed down, and is dressed much like Prospero when he is wearing his magical garment. As this grey-haired actor speaks the lines “This island’s mine by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou tak’st from me” (1.2.332-333), he radiates quiet and almost formal dignity, making slow and wide movements with his arms underlining the expression of a justified anger. At this point, in their first confrontation, Prospero has taken off his mantle, revealing white clothes underneath, and has put on a white straw hat, thereby enhancing the colour difference with Caliban. As Prospero kicks away one of Caliban’s crutches, causing Caliban to fall over, and as Miranda, played in a fresh, natural and almost animal-like fashion by Tinarie van Wyk Loots, speaks of “thy vile race” (2.1.358), one cannot help but pity this Caliban and desire his freedom.

This word, “freedom”, is among the last ones shouted by Caliban in a wild and exotic dance with Trinculo and Stephano and some spirits. It is the last visual image before the interval, played to the fortissimo sounds of drums and cymbals in which Caliban throws away his crutches. The freedom cries of Caliban are thus followed by the interval applause of the audience, just as after the epilogue the freedom cries of Caliban are the last visual image for the audience. However, Caliban’s freedom cries are tainted both by his connection to the two drunkards and by the chasm there is between Caliban and the African spirits surrounding him. His freedom cries at the end follow upon scene 5.1, in which he much resembles Malvolio of *Twelfth Night* as Prospero sends him away. Amidst the reunions, the feasting, and the forgiveness, Caliban radiates controlled anger and resentment against those who have tortured and deceived him throughout the play. The grudge, the anger, and the hatred throw a wet blanket over the joys of the kings and the nobles and fit the colonial interpretation of *The Tempest*.

However, this production also presents another approach to colonialism in the relation between Prospero and Ariel, played by the physically strong and impressive Atandwa Kani. Contrasted in many ways to Caliban, this character is not dressed in clothes, but only bears a loin-cloth. His body is painted all over with white stripes and while Caliban is crippled and bent down, Ariel radiates a strong, self-assured and very physical presence. There is nothing airy about this Ariel, and the spirits that accompany him throughout the production use African language and are dressed in a wide variety of exuberant African clothes, both earthy-coloured and in very vivid colours such as red, yellow and green. The music that accompanies them is African-based and the excellent puppeteers create a whole series of fantastical masked creatures, such as serpent-like monsters, reflecting the forces of nature in Zulu cosmology, according to the programme notes.

Just as Caliban, Ariel is also a servant of Prospero, and in their first confrontation, when Ariel questions Prospero about his promise of freedom, Prospero throws Ariel down on the floor and stands above him in a visual image of total oppression. However, the difference between Caliban and Ariel could not be bigger; Ariel shows a strong confidence in himself and in Prospero and is much more part and parcel of the natural, African background of the spirits than Caliban, who seems to have been transformed by his confrontations with Prospero. As the spirits first encounter King Alonso, they mimic his signing of the cross in a way that shows the

chasm between the two cultures. What to Alonso, his compatriots and Prospero, who all use the Catholic signing, is a logical part of their identity, is to Ariel and the African spirits no more than an odd way of moving one's hand in front of one's body. Compared to the dynamics, the power, and the natural joy that Ariel and his spirits radiate, Caliban's anger, dignified in itself, somewhat turns him into a grumpy, old man at times. Caliban's dignity is streaked with sadness and viciousness, his freedom is tainted with a grudge, marking him still a slave to the past.

In the final scene Prospero throws water on Ariel in a kind of baptism ritual as he releases him, in a scene where they are both visibly touched by the mutual bond they shared. Tainted though it was by slavery, a mutual liking and respect grew between them. The past is there and it is not something they can undo, but Ariel's freedom runs deeper than Caliban's. On leaving Prospero, Ariel also shouts "freedom", but, as opposed to Caliban, his is a cry of power, the cry of a man assured about his role in the world. Colonialism and its aftermath in the current multicultural societies take many faces and many directions in this strong and exciting production and Prospero's final line, "Let your indulgence set me free", resonates the importance of the past which one cannot undo, while at the same time imploring one to move beyond it.



Anthony Sher (Prospero) and Atandwa Kani (Ariel). Photo by Eric Miller.



Anthony Sher (Prospero) and John Kani (Caliban). Photo by Ellen Elmendrop.





The company. Photo by Eric Miller.

***As You Like It*. Dir. Damianos Constantinidis. “Angelus Novus” Theatre Group, “Vafeio” Theatre.**

***Queen Lear*. Dir. Kostis Kapelonis. “Delos G8” Theatre Group, “Delos” Theatre.**

Reviewed by Xenia Georgopoulou<sup>b</sup>

### Gender Games on the Athenian Stage

The 2008-2009 theatre season in Athens offered a handful of interesting Shakespearean productions, including an adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* by Constantinos Arvanitakis, who staged it for the National Theatre. In this review I chose to present two productions which raised gender issues, namely Damianos Constantinidis’s *As You Like It* and Costis Capelonis’s *Queen Lear*.

For his production of *As You Like It* with his theatre group “Angelus Novus” Damianos Constantinidis chose an all-male cast. As the director points out in his note for the programme, in the Epilogue of *As You Like It* Shakespeare underlines the convention of an all-male cast, which made him keep this convention, as the Epilogue would indeed make no sense uttered by a female performer.

The choice of male actors (most of whom were given several parts) was not the only feature of this production that took us back to Shakespeare’s time. The director also opted for an empty space, devoid of heavy sets and props. Apostolos Apostolidis, who designed the set and costumes, painted the space green and put curtains of the same colour at the entrances and exits of the main space. At the back of the stage three openings led to a space where costumes were kept and where some of the actors waited for their turn to reappear onstage. Though backstage, both the costumes and the actors were visible by the audience, which seemed to denote the director’s aim to stress an idea found in *As You Like It* as well as pretty much everywhere in Shakespeare: that of the play-within-the-play. The fact that the costumes were often changed onstage also enhanced this idea, and so did the nature of the costumes itself. Apostolidis designed colourful but also simple costumes, easy to change onstage. It is of note that in some cases the costumes were rather irrelevant to the character’s status; however, in those cases the clothing seemed to indicate the character’s quality. A striking example was that of Phoebe, who appeared in a flamboyant costume so unsuitable for a shepherdess; however, the costume was totally in line with her snobbish behaviour towards Silvius.

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The play-within-the-play idea was also stressed in other details of the production. For example, in the scene where Orlando woos “Ganymede”, who has taken up the role of Rosalind, Celia chose a spot, sat down, and watched the two lovers while munching her snack, roasted gourd-seeds, widely consumed by Greek audiences during various spectacles in open-air spaces, especially in the past; to a Greek audience, at least, Celia’s action automatically confirmed the mock-wooing scene as a spectacle, a play-within-the play.

What was particularly interesting in this production was the groupwork, which added highly to the atmosphere of the play, introduced the different contexts and provided occasional mirth at the same time. In the beginning of the play a group of actors in training suits introduced, as it were, the wrestling scene; in the forest the presence of the deposed Duke among his coughing and sneezing followers, covered with blankets, indicated the harshness of a life none of them had been used to; a group of bleating actors with bells (also used for a live music piece composed by Costis Vozikis) introduced the scenes with the forest’s locals etc. The actors’ ingenious movements were choreographed by Efi Drosou.

Although the actors’ performance of the female parts varied, I believe that they all avoided what Constantinidis seems to detest: the laughter often spurred by a male transvestite. Leonidas Marakis gave a most playful Celia (perhaps a little cartoonish at times), as opposed to Dimitris Daskas’s serious and more “sincere” Rosalind; Dimitris Kartokis and Antonis Krombas, in the roles of Phoebe and Audrey respectively, often enriched their humorous acting with minimal gestures or gazes. Each one of them was so different from the rest, yet none of them seemed to have taken his female part less seriously than the others. On the whole, the production was absolutely enjoyable, and the actors also seemed to enjoy it.

The translation used for the production was by Eleni Merkenidou.

In his production with “Delos G8” under the title *Queen Lear* Costis Capelonis seemed to have gone a little further in the gender game by inverting the play’s parts. It all started as a need to solve the problem of having more female than male performers in the group. Thus, the sexes were inverted: King Lear became a queen, with three sons instead of daughters, and Gloucester became a gentlewoman, with two daughters instead of sons, with all the new characters bearing the names of the actors (Olga Nikolaidou, for example, was Queen Olga etc.). Only the Fool remained male; however, a sex inversion here wouldn’t really make a difference, since that particular character (unlike, say, Touchstone in *As You Like It*) is presented as a rather asexual figure. In addition to the sex inversion of the characters, a few parts were eliminated, such as Albany, Cornwall, Burgundy and France.

Though originating from a practical need, the inversion of the sexes was also pursued as the production’s philosophy; as Nikolaidou remarks in the programme, “power [. . .] is sexless”. Indeed, the inversion of the sexes led to typical characters found elsewhere in drama and life alike: Loukia Mandali’s Countess Loukiani (the female Gloucester), in her austere black dress, reminded of a strict mother like Lorca’s Bernarda Alba; Eugenia Panagopoulou’s Eugenia (the female Edmund) was the femme fatale that ruined Queen Olga’s two elder sons; and Stelios Patsias’s Stylianos (the male Regan) gave the typical figure of the spoiled son.



Capelonis originally had yet another idea, which he apparently did not pursue to the end; that was the idea of locating the play's action in a mental hospital. Having a look at the programme before the show, I found out that Nikolaidou, who was also in charge of the programme material, had included various texts about madness; and among the questions to be answered in the programme by the members of the cast (questions like "Why Shakespeare?", "Why *King Lear*?" etc.) was "Why madmen?". However, the setting of the production did not necessarily allude to a madhouse, although, knowing about this idea, one could find relevant traces here and there. The acting space, for example, designed by the director and constructed by the actors themselves, covered with white sheets and transparent nylon curtains, alluded to a medical, sterilized environment, or to the whiteness of the strait-jacket; the eccentric costumes, designed by Anthia Loizou, consisting of particles of different styles and colours, could also denote some kind of mental disturbance of the characters; even the interesting choice of the old translation by Dimitrios Vikelas, first published in 1876, written in a language quite distant from modern Greek, could indicate the language of people who belong to a different world. Moreover, the madhouse setting could also justify the inversion of the sexes.

Although the original madhouse idea was eventually abandoned, as it was made clear by the production itself, it still helped with the actors' perception of madness, as Nikolaidou believes. Nikolaidou herself gave the unexaggerated madness of a person that used to be in power; as for Yorgos Adamantiadis's Fool, his madness denoted the fool's detachment from the world of social convention as well as a distant sorrow for his mistress's state; and Maria Asteriou, who played Maria (the female Edgar), performed a feigned madness mixed with grief for her mother. Of the rest of the actors only Nikos Alexiou in the role of Nikolaos (the male Goneril) and Vassiliki Tsekoura as Countess Vassiliki (the female Kent) apparently stuck to the idea of the madhouse, Alexiou making peculiar gestures and Tsekoura with an acting that seemed distant from that of her colleagues. Capelonis apparently did not insist on the idea of the madhouse, and thus the rest of the cast did not work on their identity as madmen. Still, the entire cast of *Queen Lear*, all of them 2008 graduates of the drama school "Delos" (run by Dimitra Hatoupi, an outstanding Greek actress), worked hard and presented a disciplined as well as touching production. *Queen Lear* was indeed a pleasant surprise from this group of young actors, and an exemplar for their young colleagues.



Leonidas Marakis as Celia, Yannis Drakopoulos as Touchstone, and Dimitris Daskas as Rosalind. Photo by Panayotis Koutrakis.



Tassos Barniadakis as Oliver, Dimitris Daskas as Rosalind, and Leonidas Marakis as Celia. Photo by Panayotis Koutrakis.



The company. Photo by Panayotis Koutrakis.





Olga Nikolaidou as Queen Olga (the female King Lear) and George Adamantiadis as George (the male Cordelia). Photo by Gogo Thanasaki.



The company. Photo by Gogo Thanasaki.



***Hamlet Committed Suicide*. Dir. Stella Mari. Street theatre, “Minus [two]” Theatre Group, Thission pedestrian zone (Apostolou Pavlou & Heracleidon).**

***The Documentary*. Dir. Sergios Gakas. “Ex Animo” Theatre Group, “Altera Pars” Theatre.**

Reviewed by Xenia Georgopoulou

#### **Hamlet in the streets of Athens – and onstage...**

Athens, Greece, September 2011, in the middle of the financial crisis. On the pedestrian zone of Thission, right at the feet of the Acropolis, six young actors dressed in black began their street performance by forming a square, using candles in red plastic glasses for the front, right and left sides, and their own bodies for the back. This was their stage, where they soon started running in agony, stopping every now and then to deliver lines from *Hamlet*. The actors held electric torches, which they occasionally turned to their own bodies, to reveal the name of the character they were playing written in white capital letters on different black T-shirts, which they wore in layers.

No matter which part the actors played each time, the universal message of Shakespeare’s text was there, even for those who had no idea about what really happens in the play. The excerpts from the Shakespearean text, so aptly chosen, reflected so vividly our own era, and the situation in Greece in particular, that at times one had the feeling that they were written recently for the purpose. The rotten state Marcellus refers to in 1.4 and the “sea of troubles”, “the whips and scorns of time”, “the law’s delay”, “the insolence of office” mentioned by the prince of Denmark in his famous “to be, or not to be” speech in 3.1 seemed to echo several of the aspects or causes of the crisis that Greece is currently going through.

The whole concept and dramatic synthesis was created by the director, Stella Mari, whose words I would like to reproduce here as the best way to synopsise this short street performance:

“Six different Hamlets ‘onstage’. Six individuals in a crisis –personal, social, financial, national. The man of our era? The Greek of today?”

We dared to borrow with awe and enthusiasm the universal archetype of the unsatisfied, betrayed and constantly in (self)denial Hamlet, to speak about ‘today’ in our own way, with the performance *Hamlet Committed Suicide*.

A conscious ‘arbitrariness’ (?) in the dramatic synthesis –regarding the sequence and the interrelatedness of the excerpts–, a strict kinetic form and a specific consistency concerning the

choice of neutral costumes and music, contributed to the creation of this performance, where the element of 'creation' rules.

Thus the characters are annulled, not in order to weaken the Shakespearean text, but, instead, in order to bring it to a first level through this particular 'reading', where the characters become its precise and disciplined vehicles. Keeping their electric torches constantly on, they express their tenacious need to exist and survive in a world that collapses.

Our set is the universal and eternal symbol of civilization, the Parthenon. Thus the dialogue between the play and the environment does not work solely in a contrapuntal way; as the omnipotence and the inspiration that springs from the Sacred Rock is undeniable, we desire to underline our will not to let a pessimistic colour rule. Instead, the call to all of us is to confront with responsibility the challenges, bets, hardships of our era, which seems to touch the borders of the historical."

The translation used was by Yorgos Heimonas. The actors: Konstantinos Ayannopoulos, Andreas Andreadis, Ariadne Zilou, Hara Kontaxaki, Stella Mari, Angeliki Bini.

A month or so later, elsewhere in Athens, another theatre group, in a totally different mood, attempted to solve a series of crucial problems regarding Shakespeare's most discussed tragedy: What if old Hamlet had not married Gertrude? What if Claudius had killed king Hamlet when the prince was a baby? What if Hamlet did not believe in ghosts? What if the play was not set in Denmark? With their play *The Documentary* the members of the theatre group "Ex Animo" answered all these questions onstage.

The hilarious production of "Ex Animo" involved many more amusing scenes; in *The Documentary* Walter Raleigh discusses Shakespeare's plays with Ben Jonson accompanied by an illiterate maid, and they all make jokes based on the titles of Shakespeare's plays; Shakespeare's wife Silvia gives to William all the details of *Hamlet's* plot in a single soliloquy, where she discusses what would have happened if she had married his brother instead; the prince of Denmark himself discusses the meaning of the "to be, or not to be" speech with his mother, uncle, Ophelia and Laertes; Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus pose all sorts of weird questions to the Ghost, trying to define what the afterlife looks like.

The title of the play refers to its structure: at several points there is a narrator (played by different actors), who gives the background of *Hamlet* in the beginning and introduces throughout the play the different parts of a supposed documentary made on *Hamlet*. In this documentary (the play itself) the whole Hamlet issue is discussed by critics; Freud himself appears to offer his own approach of the central hero's psyche; old Marcellus, still waiting on the battlements to be replaced, is interviewed by a reporter about what happened in Elsinore a long time ago; and a scientific experiment is presented about what would have happened if *Hamlet* was set in France, Italy, England, Spain, and Jamaica, explaining why the play was finally set in Denmark.

The "documentary" also touched on issues such as Hamlet's counsel to the actors, and investigated whether modern professionals stick to the prince's tips by presenting a few contemporary approaches to the scene of Ophelia's funeral: these versions included three

different “postmodern” productions (involving elements such as excessive acting, a fragmented text and a weird chorus), a production modeled on traditional Cretan culture (probably reflecting the use of Greek tradition in several modern productions), one based on the aesthetics of the TV series created by a well-known Greek director of the genre, and one clearly alluding to the films of a famous Greek film director.

The play culminated in an acted synopsis of *Hamlet*, just in case some of the spectators did not manage to figure out what is happening in the play after all this fuss...

*The Documentary* is an ingenious parody of *Hamlet*. The director Sergios Gakas orchestrated his five actors (Pavlos Emmanouilidis, Yorgos Kritos, Rozamalia Kiriou, Konstantina Ladopoulou and Zisis Roubos) in a perfectly tuned production, whose cartoonish character was impeccably served by the actors’ skills. The grotesque costumes and minimal set by Elena Christouli, as well as the music by Stathis Drogosis, completed this most enjoyable production, which is a great painkiller for the Athenians in these hard times.



The theatre group “Minus [two]” under the Acropolis. Photo by Kostas Drimtzias.



Zisis Roubos, Rozamalia Kiriou, Yorgos Kritos, Pavlos Emmanouilidis and Konstantina Ladopoulou. Photo by Tassos Vrettos.

***Othello*. Dir. Yorgos Kimoulis and Konstantinos Markoulakis. Badminton Theatre, Athens, Greece.**

Reviewed by Nektarios-Georgios Konstantinidis<sup>c</sup>

***Othello* as flat melodrama**

The figure of a Muslim-looking woman appeared at the centre of the stage while the lights of the auditorium went off at the Badminton Theatre of Athens. Her presence was silent and mysterious. She could represent the voice of Othello's conscience, or the primitive instincts of his tribe.

This short reference to the Moor's background was soon replaced by a series of modern images, as the mise-en-scene by Yorgos Kimoulis and Konstantinos Markoulakis transferred Shakespeare's tragedy to our own era. The production was carefully designed for the purpose, with video projections showing views of modern cities, but also clips with the characters, dressed as high officers, enjoying themselves in western-style nightclubs of eastern countries or planning military expeditions on laptops.

The modernization of the whole production also involved the play's translation, also by Kimoulis and Markoulakis. In their text the richness of Shakespeare's language, which lies mainly in its unique imagery and rhythm, was lost. One could detect the neutralization of language and consequently the weakening of meaning. Vociferous and gross words and phrases, apparently aiming at a realistic expression, violated the rules of poetic language. The agony to utter a vocabulary of a contemporary, accessible, totally familiar, everyday, absolutely understandable quality was more than apparent. But direct, even raw, realism does not have to be based on vulgarity. The high poetic language, the dark emotion, the underlying cynicism, the sharp sense of humour of the original were neutralized by scurrilous interpolations.

Another weakness of this production of *Othello* was that the two directors did not manage to support the complexity of the play.

The main difference between *Othello* and the rest of Shakespeare's tragedies lies in that it is a tragedy that moves mainly within the sphere of private rather than public life. Despite the fact that the play begins with the threat of a Turkish invasion on Cyprus, which requires Othello's presence on the island, the destruction of the Turkish fleet by a tempest lets the play concentrate on the personal life of the black general, who settles on the island with his young wife.

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Shakespeare focuses on his characters' particular feelings, like envy and jealousy, which makes the play even more "personal". The playwright develops the action based on the psychological phases Othello goes through within the passion of his jealousy; the hero is prey to Iago and his own passion, which is no other but the envy he feels of his superiors. In fact, the action itself is built piece by piece by Iago, who literally stages and acts in a play he himself has conceived.

*Othello* is also one of Shakespeare's most ironic plays, where everything is proved to be something else: the dark-skinned hero is mentally white, the fair-skinned one is proved the darkest of all, the honest proves dishonest, the faithful faithless, the truth proves a lie.

On the whole, the mise-en-scene as well as the acting seemed to ignore the complexity of the characters, the manifold relations between them, the political and social dimensions of the story, and eventually turned Shakespeare's tragedy of envy into a simplistic melodrama.

Yorgos Kimoulis as Othello did not unfold his acting abilities, which could well have given a stimulating dimension to the middle-aged general. Konstantinos Markoulakis as Iago also remained superficial; he presented his character as the man next door, but was trapped in an exaggerated and schematic acting.

Gogo Brebou was also insufficient as Emilia. Desdemona's confidante stands on a borderline: she is an accomplice, but also the voice of truth. She is as innocent as Desdemona, as guilty as Iago, as gullible as Othello. She is the resultant of all the others, that is why she experiences the strongest shocks, which are let out all at once in the last act, where she becomes the only character that can name Evil. Brebou did not manage to express all these aspects of the part, probably also because of her static acting, with her hands in her pockets.

Alexandros Bourdounis's Cassio was rather indifferent, and Smaragda Karidi's Desdemona was portrayed in a most simplistic way, as a beautiful and charming female with naïve behaviour.

Of the rest of the cast Yorgos Psihoyos, Elias Petropouleas and Yannis Kotsarinis stood out. The cast also included: Stathis Panayotidis, Dominiki Mitropoulou, Nikos Mihakos, Mihalis Sakkoulis, Maria Papadopoulou, Yannis Milonas, Traiana Anania.

The directors' concept was supported by Athanassia Smaragdi's set, Maria Karapouliou's costumes, Sakis Birbilis's lights design, Elena Gerodimou's choreography, and Demetris Maramis's music, which was beneficial to the whole outcome.

The production we saw at the Badminton Theatre, which was on tour all over Greece during the summer, showed interesting elements of mise-en-scene, but remained incomplete.





Yorgos Kimoulis. Photo by Tassos Vrettos.



Smaragda Karidi, Yorgos Kimoulis and Konstantinos Markoulakis.  
Photo by Tassos Vrettos.