

PERFORMANCE REVIEWS^{*}

**Shakespeare à La Brasileira Coulours Portugal:
A Review of
Sua Incelença, Ricardo III
Produced by Clowns be Shakespeare
Porto, Praça D. João I, 09 June 2013**

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The Brazilian theatre company *Clowns de Shakespeare* participated in the closing ceremonies of the FITEI¹ 2013 in Porto, last June, with their acclaimed version of William Shakespeare's *King Richard III*. The play debuted in 2010, winning prizes at national and international festivals, and was directed by Gabriel Villela, who travelled to Portugal for the occasion.

The troupe impress with a multitalented performance that includes dancing, singing, and playing various musical instruments

^{*} *Sederi Yearbook* collaborates with www.ReviewingShakespeare.com, the first website devoted to scholarly reviews of and writing about worldwide Shakespearean performance (theatre, film, TV) for a general audience. Reviews about Shakespearean performances worldwide submitted for publication to the *Sederi Yearbook* are sent to the team of specialists managing *ReviewingShakespeare*, and they will decide whether the review might also be suitable for publication on their webpage. Inversely, a selection of reviews of Spanish and Portuguese productions of Shakespeare's plays submitted to *ReviewingShakespeare* are also considered for publication in the *Sederi Yearbook*.

¹ Festival Internacional de Teatro de Expressões Ibéricas.

on stage. Marcos França, as Richard, is a remarkable actor and musician, while Titina Medeiros (Queen Elizabeth) and Dudu Galvão (playing several characters) charm us with their impressive voices. The cast as a whole masters the “circussy” language of the production, denouncing the cynicism of the powerful through fine irony and laughter.

Despite the tragic content of *Richard III*, the Brazilian company emphasises a farcical take on events, using physical humour, without radically changing the plot. The title, *Sua Incelença, Ricardo III*, presents from the very beginning a national identity statement that permeates the whole production. The word *incelença* here contains a double pun. On the one hand, it is a corruption of the word for the honorific style “His/Her Excellency”: *Sua Excelência*. This corruption immediately brings to Lusophone ears an image of regional or rural speech, as a variety that deviates from the standard form, denoting the backlands, and lower levels of formal education. On the other hand, it refers to the *incelenças* or *incelências*, a variety of musical expression typical of north-eastern Brazil in the form of a broad collection of short songs performed almost exclusively in funeral contexts; but such meaning is neither obvious to a Portuguese audience nor familiar to many native Brazilians, who are similarly unaware of this tradition.

Even though the comedy of this production seduces the audience to a great extent, some of the strongest regional references pass unacknowledged by the Lusitanian public, perhaps producing a lesser impact than that expected by the company. All in all, throughout the play, more specific regional references tend to lose their impact, as in the case of the *preto velho* in Act II. Literally meaning “old black men,” *pretos velhos* are powerful entities in the *Umbanda* religion, an example of Brazilian



Fig. 1 - King Richard III (Marco França)²

² All photos taken by the author, reproduced with the permission of the company.

religious syncretism³. In Brazil, they prove to be popular cultural figures, regardless of religious beliefs. But in Porto, the ailing King Edward IV, speaking in their typical parlance and using their body gestures (Act II, sc. I), does not seem to make much sense to the general audience – *pretos velhos* being barely known in this country.

However, the characterisation of Richard (fig.1) as a vicious man is more successfully done. This is initially conveyed through his dark, heavy clothes, and when he appears on stage for the first time he is seen wearing a pig mask made of leather. The symbol of the pig as a reference to greed and gluttony pervades the production as a whole. Richard's first lines, for instance, are in fact pig grunts and squeals. By correlation, this image also suggests dirtiness, impurity and unholiness.⁴

Richard is not exactly portrayed with a clear hunchback, as is the case in many productions, but there are several hints of his deformity: he has a lame left arm, hand and foot, and he limps and walks in a slouched manner. To complete such a suspicious appearance, the actor wears tattoo sleeves, suggestive of a "badass," hardcore, or rock'n' roll stereotype close to caricature. His sexual appetite is also hinted at right from his first appearance, as he mimes masturbatory movements when caressing a red plastic watering can between his legs (which is in fact his "horse"), oinking and snorting all the while. The scene (Act I, sc.I) can be regarded as an example of the director's choice to turn the verbal puns and sexual innuendos (easily lost in translation and, as such, often unperceived by the spectators) into physical humour, conveying them visually rather than orally, in an effective adaptation of the original text to the stage context.

³ Umbanda blends African creeds, Catholicism, Spiritism and some indigenous faith elements. Pretos velhos are spirits that present themselves in the form of old African male slaves, full of wisdom, humility, patience and faith. They are easily recognised, sitting on their stools, slowly smoking a pipe, blessing people with branches of rue and puffs of the pipe. Some scholars argue they are an Afro-Brazilian metaphor for Jesus Christ (see Pellegrini: 2011).

⁴ The pig mask is also a reference to the white boar that figures on Richard's coat of arms, as a creature that can be considered both fierce and hideous.



Fig. 2. *The Duchess of York*
(César Ferrario)

From costumes to props and setting, Villela's production does not try to create a realistic illusion. Spectators can clearly see the actors changing costumes right behind an open stage designed for the streets, thereby breaking the "fourth wall." The audience does not seem bothered by the appearance of the great Duchess of York (César Ferrario, also doubling as Sir James Tyrrel and the Duke of Clarence) in a long fringed red dress, blond wig and golden crown, in sharp contrast with the actor's natural thick black moustache *à la* Fred Mercury (fig.2). On the contrary, it revels in laughter and applause, particularly when Ferrario shakes his wig off, dramatically singing the ballad section of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody."

Also part of the fantasy of the production is the mix of fine fabric (silk and velvet, for instance) and rustic, simple materials (working boots, canvas), in line with the director's intention to blend international with regional environments, and the erudite with the popular. The idea is to create a mixture of styles and debunk a supposed cultural hierarchy, in a production that celebrates national identity but tries to communicate with a wider audience. The result overall is an image of a colourful patchwork of styles that confers on the production a unique, magical atmosphere. The same principle applies to the choice of music, another important element in this production.

Indeed, most background sound and songs are performed live. The whole troupe sings and plays a range of instruments (from a xylophone to clarinets), and Richard is always busy playing either the piano or the accordion. The play even opens with the whole group on stage singing and dancing choreographically to "Daydream."⁵ As a consequence, the audience is often taken by

⁵ A very famous symphonic pop/rock song by Belgian band Wallace Collection, originally recorded in 1968.

surprise, especially when it recognises a familiar tune and hears the lyrics in English, perhaps not expecting a Brazilian adaptation with songs in a foreign language. International songs are mostly sung live over pre-recorded music, while the typically Brazilian and folkloric music is always live. This alternation between Anglophone and Brazilian songs reinforces the collage effect that characterizes the production. The Brazilian songs are well-known nursery rhymes or famous pieces of folk music from the north east, the lyrics altered to include character names or details of the story. Unsurprisingly, the public tends to react with more indifference to them than towards the international hits, to which the vast majority of the audience sang and clapped along.

This “indifference” is especially true in Acts I and II, for in Act III, the comic figure of the *cangaceiro* (Sir James Tyrrel) breaks down any resistance, greatly benefiting the flow of the remaining part of the performance (fig. 3). *Cangaceiros* have been emblematic figures of the north east since the nineteenth century⁶. Their typical attire contributes to their stereotype: coarse brown leather



Fig. 3. Sir James Tyrrel (César Ferrario)

clothing (trousers, jacket and hat) lavishly decorated, shotguns, and a long narrow knife called the *peixeira*, are their basic items. That is the exact image chosen to represent Tyrrel, called by Richard to kill those representing any danger to his ascending the throne: Lord Rivers, Lord Hastings, the young princes and the Duke of Buckingham. Incidentally, all the murders Tyrrel performs have an amusingly clownish manner and most lines are delivered in song. As a result, a mix of fear and fascination is reproduced on stage, for the audience laughs, sings and dances along to engaging folk music – even if it is not familiar with the reference to the *cangaceiros*.

⁶ Nomadic bandits that fight against all types of authority, from powerful and rich landowners to government representatives. Just like hit men, *cangaceiros* can also be hired for revenge.



Fig. 4. Props and stage

decorated wooden carts at the base of the semi-circle marked on the ground are covered in the back and on top by tapestries; they serve as privileged positions on stage, but also as a wardrobe and backstage dressing room. Other unexpected objects adorn the stage: in Act V, some of the ghosts of Richard's victims are represented by four "air-dancers"⁸ distributed at the back of the carts (fig.5). Such objects are hugely popular in Brazil, where they are called *bonecos de posto* (i.e. "petrol station dolls"), for they tend to be associated with petrol station advertising. Another example is the green coconuts on which faces had been carved and drawn (fig.3) to represent the princes locked in the tower and then killed by Tyrell– not a casual choice, since the green types (instead of the brown ones) are at a younger stage of maturation, just like King Edward IV's young sons. More importantly, the green

Also carefully chosen, the props are creative, colourful and in line with Gabriel Villela's aesthetics of mixing genres, statuses and national/international references. The pattern of plastic flowers and parasols (some white, others black or red) already seen in *Romeu e Julieta*⁷, is part and parcel of Villela's Rococo and poetic style (fig.4). Three richly



Fig. 5. The Ghosts (airdancers)

⁷ The first Shakespeare production by the director Gabriel Villela, it debuted in 1992 and became an iconic production in contemporary Brazilian theatre.

⁸ Large inflatable apparatuses made of a light fabric similar to that of a windsock, consisting of a long tube attached to a fan which causes the tube to move in a dancing or waving motion.

coconuts can be immediately associated with such tropical countries as Brazil.

It is impressive that we can still call *Sua Incelença, Ricardo III* tragic, for the only grave moments are focused on Queen Margaret's ominous speeches and curses, and on Act V, as well the aftermath of Richard's death. Yet, such moments manage to counterbalance the over-whelming comic tone of the performance. All other scenes of gore and violence are here turned into folk dance with a long knife (the murder of Rivers and Hastings), strangling of coconut straws (the young princes), or suffocation of a hairless rubber puppet in a plastic bag (Clarence). Laughter and tears being both powerful expressions of strong feelings, the director's privileged choice for catharsis is certainly the former. But regardless of all its comic elements and its light-hearted denouement (the actors sing, play and dance around the stage at the end), the spectators are nonetheless presented with the play as a tragedy of greed and self-indulgence—and this can be felt throughout the brief moment of absolute silence which generally follows Richard's death. The spectators only start moving once the lights are turned back on, and their initial timidity is suddenly turned into standing ovation.

With this innovative production of *Richard III*, Villela's idea is to paint a Shakespearean scene with vivid Brazilian colours. Does he go too far in his cultural re-appropriation, to the point of failing to establish a dialogue with his Portuguese audience? Not really. Some elements or symbols may be unfortunately lost, but in various degrees most spectators seem to leave the show with the feeling of having spent a magical night somewhere in folkloric Brazil, while never leaving the flexible boundaries of the Shakespearean realm.

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Macbeth
Suspense, London Puppetry Festival
Little Angel Theatre
18 Octobre 2013, London

Isabel Guerrero
Universidad de Murcia

Cast and Creative Team

Puppeteers: Claire Harvey, Lori Hopkins, and Lowri James.

Director: Peter Glanville

Puppet Designer: Lyndie Wright

Lighting Designer: David Duffy

Costume designer: Keith Frederick

Composer: James Hesford

Set and Prop makers: Peter O'Rourke and Nele de Craecker

Set Construction: Simon Plumridge

Puppet makers: Lyndie Wright, Rebekah Wild, Jan Zalud, and Chloe Purcell

Stage Manager: Sarah Cowan

The Suspense London Puppetry Festival is a biennial puppetry event for adult audiences produced by Little Angel Theatre, a small venue in the heart of Islington exclusively devoted to puppets. There, Peter Glanville has presented his particular vision of *Macbeth*, featuring the characters not with human-like puppets, but with a variety of birds with some human characteristics (from cockerels to pigeons). Glanville, director of the festival and of the venue where this production was held, has worked on Shakespeare before, his most recent Shakespearean production being *The Tempest* (2010), a co-production between Little Angel Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company. Using puppets means that the emphasis of the play is necessarily on the visual world that puppets create. As Peter Glanville suggests, the purpose of this work is not to replicate the actions of real actors, but to “explor[e] a visual language, a choreography, that could bring the story to life.” This revision of Shakespeare’s classic poses a challenge: how to tell *Macbeth*’s bloody story through a medium that belongs to the realm of children’s story-telling.

The selection of birds is not incidental: the different types of birds help to enhance some aspects of the characters' personalities as they create associations between bird and character. The main characters are human-like cockerels – Banquo, Macbeth and Macduff – and their wives hens – Lady Macduff is a “housewife” hen taking care of her chickens and Lady Macbeth is a slender one with no chickens to look after; Duncan and his children are all swans to emphasise their royal condition; the murderers are ravens that can easily assassinate Banquo with their beaks; the English army is composed of falcons; and the servant informing Lady Macbeth of the return of her husband and the king in the first act is a homing pigeon. Imagination is set free when it comes to the three witches: they are phantom-like crows with evil eyes; Hecate is similar to them, the main difference being her head: a raven skull which differentiates her from the other witches. The play starts with the three witches symbolizing the Fates, as they take strings from a mountain of wool with their beaks. This beginning, with one puppeteer manipulating each of the witches, gives rise to the association between puppeteers and witches: the puppeteers are similar to the weird sisters because they also manipulate the action of the play. Far from being a show for children, this production portrays the violence of the play through images such as the corpses being caught from their legs by the puppeteers before taking them off stage.

Apart from the connotations that the use of different birds may have, the choice has, to some extent, a textual basis: references to birds in the text are used to define some of the characters. Such is the case, for instance, of Macduff and his family, as his comparison to a dam and chickens when he learns about the assassination of his family in IV.iii turns from metaphor into reality because his wife and children are indeed a dam and chickens respectively. The assimilation of the characters to members of the animal kingdom confers a new meaning on the references to birds in the play: it is now easier for Lady Macbeth to confound Macbeth's voice with the owl screaming (“I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry,” 976) after the murder of the king in II.ii.

The variety of birds is also translated into a diversity of puppets. The main characters belong to the type known as “bunraku

puppets,”⁹ the pigeon and raven are stick puppets and the swans are object puppets (they are plush toys manipulated to bring them to life). All this variety, together with the constant presence of the puppeteers dressed in black (so as to go unnoticed), gives the presentation its quality, combined with the expertise in puppetry-making and their manipulation, which creates a unique atmosphere for a *Macbeth* in the animal or, rather, bird kingdom. Instead of the puppeteers providing the voices for the characters, they are recorded and perfectly synchronized with the action. The only drawback of this technique is that it makes it difficult to discern soliloquies from the rest of the dialogue on certain occasions.

Regarding the adaptation, it follows a common pattern within *Macbeth*’s production history. The first act is performed almost completely, while the acts following are heavily cut, though the main points of the action together with the most famous monologues are retained. The porter scene and the conversation between Lady Macduff and her son disappear, as does the effect of Ross’s words when he tells Macduff that his wife and children are well, only to reveal to him a bit later that his whole family has been murdered. The production relies perhaps too much on monologues, slowing down the action until the Birnam Wood arrives at Dunsinane. This attention to monologues shows a *Macbeth* that is heavily psychological: as much as the action is still important, the thoughts of the characters become central.

One of the wonders of puppet theatre undoubtedly is the set, and this is one of the strong points of this production: a set of multifunctional platforms that serves as Macbeth’s castle as well as the magic cauldron from where the three apparitions emerge. This structure has special relevance in the last act, after the messenger tells Macbeth that the Birnam Wood is moving. From this moment, the production reaches epic dimensions. To stage the ending, the puppeteers divide the set into two halves and move it to the sides, thus revealing the rear part of the stage to the audience, all this to the rhythm of beating drums. Hidden behind the set are stick puppets of falcons attached to wooden trees that the puppeteers move to the

⁹They are inspired by ancient Japanese puppetry known as “*bunraku*.” These puppets allow the movement of head and limbs, giving a feeling of reality because they can imitate human motion. They need to be managed by one to three puppeteers depending on the kind of movement required.

front of the stage, leaving Macbeth surrounded by the bird-like English army. The bird features of the characters have special importance in the last moments of the production: instead of fighting with their swords, the final duel between Macbeth and Macduff is transformed into a cockfight. To do so, the bunraku puppets are replaced by stick puppets of cockerels which no longer have human features. While the cockerels fight, feathers fly and the birds cluck until Macbeth's death. The relentless pace of the last ten minutes leaves the audience astonished while the young swan, Malcolm, recites the final speech.

This *Macbeth*, full of feathers and clucking, adds a double dimension of fantasy to the Shakespearean play: first, the audience is invited to believe, as children do with cartoons, that animals can behave like humans; second, the public can learn that "toys" can tell stories not only for children, but also for an adult audience fully aware of the cruelty portrayed in the Shakespearean text. At the end of the production, the audience is left with the feeling that the challenge to match Shakespeare's lines with the strong visual language of puppet theatre has been fulfilled.

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William Shakespeare, *Tempestad*
Teatro Circo
Murcia, 25 October 2013

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CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM

Actors: Victor Duplá, Quique Fernández, Antonio Galeano, Xabier Murúa, Agustín Sasián, Eduardo Ruíz, Javier Tolosa

Director: Sergio Peris-Mencheta

Translation: Fundación Shakespeare

Assistant director: Pepe Lorente

Art Director: Antonio Vicente

Costume design: Raúl Amor

Video: Joe Alonso

Steady: Victor M. Ramírez

Steady Assistant: Mikel Saukillo

Set Construction: Quique Fernández

Lighting Design: Manuel Fuster

Musical direction: Dudu Ruiz and Antonio Galeano

Sound Design: Dudu Rui y Joe Alonso

Physical training: Diana Bernedo

Graphic design: Antonio Vicente and Victor Monigote

Production managers: Nuria-Cruz Moreno and Rebeca Ledesma

A year after its creation in 2012, the Spanish company El Barco Pirata presented its production *Tempestad* in the Teatro Circo in Murcia, a venue that seems especially suitable for this imaginative work because of its wide and open stage, which invites audience's participation. The director, Sergio Peris-Mencheta, is currently involved in two Shakespearean productions: he appears as an actor in *Julius Caesar*, directed by Paco Azorín, and has also ventured to direct *The Tempest*.¹⁰ Instead of preserving the original title, the production is called simply *Tempestad*, extending the storm that takes place at the beginning to the whole play. *The Tempest* is recast as a

¹⁰ Sergio Peris-Mencheta has been awarded the Ceres Award to the Best Director for *Tempestad* [*Tempest*] and *Un trozo invisible de este mundo* [*An invisible piece of this world*], two of his latest productions.

play-within-a-play, creating a meta-theatrical frame where the spectators are asked to decide which parts belong to Shakespeare's text and which do not. To that end the play kicks off with a group of male actors who are about to begin their rehearsal of *The Tempest*. They complain, ramble and warm-up until they start the rehearsal, reading their roles directly from the text. Little by little, the actors abandon their scripts and the play turns from rehearsal to the "real" story, introducing the audience into Shakespeare's universe.

The version stresses the contest for power between different characters: Prospero is the master of the island; Antonio and Sebastian try to kill the king to get power, etc. This stress on power enhances the colonialist vision of the play as Ariel and Caliban – the "locals" on the island – appear completely subordinated to Prospero, the foreigner who has come to conquer them. Feelings are suppressed as far as Prospero's relationship with his subordinates is concerned; Ariel and Caliban appear as mere instruments that serve Prospero's purposes. This emphasis on power results in the loss of Ferdinand and Miranda's love story which, together with Miranda's astonishment at the presence of other human beings, is omitted.



Fig. 1. Photograph from the performance. Published by permission of Barco Pirata Producciones Teatrales.

Even though the production uses techniques typical of contemporary theatre (e.g. intermediality, physical theatre, etc), the fact that it is an all-male production echoes Renaissance practice. Instead of reducing the cast, the seven actors give life to over twenty different characters, doubling or even tripling the roles that each of them performs, which was of course another characteristic feature of early Modern English playmaking. In order to differentiate the characters, garments are changed from role to role. However, the actors do not change their outfit completely, they simply retouch what they are wearing, turning, for instance, the King's crown into Caliban's handcuffs. Most of the transformations from one character to another are made on stage, giving the audience the opportunity of seeing how some simple changes help to create a completely different character. In contrast to the doubling of characters that each actor performs, the role of Ariel is brought to life by three actors who perform it simultaneously. Even more innovative is the performance of Caliban: the actor interprets a character who seems mentally handicapped, which may not suit the taste of all the members of the audience. It is also notable that the actor playing Prospero and his brother Antonio is the same that performs the director of the play-within-a-play. The decision to use a director who is also an actor recalls the role that Shakespeare himself may have had in the King's Men, that of author-director-actor.

At the beginning of the production, the actor playing the director states that this play cannot be staged in a theatre, that it needs a real beach where the moonlight will replace the artificial lightning. In an attempt to bring the seaside closer, the set imitates a beach, a small island where the action takes place. The set is composed of a circle of sand, a ladder that allows for different staging options (e.g. it serves as a vessel in the opening tempest and adds a third dimension, with characters climbing the ladder on occasion), two buckets, and a screen at the back where a variety of projected images helps to convey both the ambience and magic of the play. The production is designed to catch the attention of the audience by stimulating their senses, as exotic scents invade the venue before the play starts. Water plays an important role too; one of the buckets is filled with water and is used to recreate the shipwreck of the king's vessel with a small toy ship, and the actor-director throws water at the men in the vessel to increase the veracity of the shipwreck during the tempest. Apart from water and

sand, the other two classical elements – air and fire – also appear on stage: the second bucket is used to make a bonfire to warm up Alonso and his men and, as could not been otherwise, air appears in connection to Ariel, as the three Ariel actors carry a balloon tied to their trousers. Despite its apparent simplicity, the set is characterised by chaos because the initial storm – conveyed through the movement of the actors and by a fan that helps to recreate the wind – leaves the stage covered by the paper sheets that the actors were reading at the beginning of the rehearsal.

Magic is conveyed through various means. For instance, Prospero uses the different cameras situated on stage to control everything that happens in his island. Thanks to the cameras Prospero is not only ubiquitous, but he is also able to exert his control over the visitors on the island, which helps to enhance the production's emphasis on power. Regarding Ariel, he is performed by three actors simultaneously. Two are the effects of tripling Ariel: firstly, his magic features are heightened, since he can act simultaneously in different places; and secondly it functions as an instrument of power as well, as Prospero's omnipresence is extended through the constant presence of this "triple" character. The three Ariels are dressed as schoolboys and the silver balloons tied to their trousers symbolise the fact that they are bound to Prospero. When they are not performing, they sit at the back of the stage and play music that the other characters hear, portraying Ariel's invisible presence in several scenes.

All this results in an ambitious production in which the tempest at sea is transformed into a tempest of theatrical techniques. However, the use of so many different theatrical resources is sometimes excessive, and the loss of certain parts of the story makes the production difficult to follow for someone not familiar with Shakespeare's text. Although most of the audience was fascinated with the *mise-en-scène*, the fact that several spectators left the venue halfway through gives rise to a series of reflections on the expectations that a Spanish audience may have when attending a Shakespearean production. Did they decide to leave because the play did not meet their conception of "classical" Shakespeare? Was there any other problem with the production? Both aspects may coincide. Perhaps the play did not meet the expectations occasional theatregoers may have about Shakespeare. Moreover, although the

production was well performed, the venue itself played against it at some points, because some parts of the action were slowed down as a result of the considerable width of the stage. Nevertheless, this *Tempestad* is a good example of how to recreate *The Tempest*'s fantasy world on the stage using 21st century theatrical resources.

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