

Teatre Lliure 2005. *Ricardo 3º*

Adapted and directed by Alex Rigola. Performed by Pere Arquillué

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The performance of Shakespeare's works in Spain covers a very extensive range within the national theatrical landscape, in which Teatre Lliure's adaptation of *Richard III* stood out during the 2005/2006 season. Based on the translation of the Catalan poet and translator Salvador Oliva, and directed by Alex Rigola, the show was premiered in Almagro (Ciudad Real, Spain), on 2-6 July 2005 and for several months toured Spain and several European cities, including Rome, Faro and Toulouse.

Surrounded by the spectacular *mise-en-scene* proposed by Rigola, this production received favourable critical and public responses during its performances at Seville's Teatro Central, in December 2005. As a matter of fact, the staging appears as the most outstanding feature of Teatre Lliure's approach to *Richard III*. Rigola proposes a modernization of the Shakespearean text (written 1592-1593) by means of setting it in a twentieth-century context, as he had previously done with *Titus Andronicus* (2001), and *Julius Caesar* (2002).

The spatio-temporal adaptation of the play moves to a 1970's psychedelic road bar called 'Pub Occidental,' where the intrigues and plots of the Machiavellian villain *par excellence* interact with the court's corruption and the protagonist's obsessive and growing need for power. The Texan hat Richard wears, the audiovisual input regarding America's overwhelming military power, and the references to the Columbine's High School massacre in the play's programme lead the audience to link the performance's setting to the US.

The production proposes a fragmented multiplicity, both regarding the character's movements and the stage's different levels. This effect is mainly achieved through the use of audiovisual resources which project the action into parallel spaces beyond what is physically performed on stage. A simulacrum of the Tower of London (physically placed at the top level and visible through a

small window) is projected on a screen hung at the left side of the main acting area. Through this device based on visual disjunction, Rigola presents his postmodern proposal to represent the location where the vast majority of Richard's enemies were slain under the monarch's orders. This projection alternates with an ambiguous retirement (parodying a Caribbean beach: the prototypical holiday resort for the western bourgeoisie) where the mournful characters retract due to spiritual pain.

The use of microphones (for Margaret's ghostly voice) and the musical resources (electric guitars, drums, keyboard, stereo sound) throughout the performance show the integration of the audiovisual dimension not only within the performance itself (which is quite standard in contemporary adaptations) but also within the physical stage and contextual development of the play (Richard and Buckingham sing and play the instruments). By means of these technological devices the audience witnesses a live rock session in the public introduction of Richard as the new king, once Clarence, King Edward and the two princes have been slain. The accurate choice of Rolling Stones' "Pleased to meet you" and the live music turns the stage into a Postmodern orgy (for a while a literal one) characterised by the hackneyed paradigms of contemporary human degradation such as drugs, sex, libertinism, the overpowering rule of money, and Rock 'n' Roll.

The histrionic staging delirium proposed by Rigola is supported by the visual bombing of projected clips among which the audience can recognise George Bush Jr. and Colin Powell with the US army in Iraq, Sadam Hussein, Kofi Annan, Pearl Harbour being attacked, intertwined with some fragments of *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). Accordingly, we may infer that this visual input is built around the usual threat of human violence and massacre that comes with war, so that Rigola equates Richard's obsession for power and our contemporary thirst for political control as timeless sources for human degradation and corruption. This vision can be regarded as the main core idea around which the show spins: it promotes the audience's self-awareness concerning the similarities between Richard's and our own reality and provides a global judgement of the relationship between mankind and power as unconditionally bound to destruction, horror and genocide.

However, the continuous lack of adequacy between this postmodern audiovisual stage design and the text emerges as one of the greatest points of dramatic stridency, as the necessary textual

adjustments for the adaptation of the Bard's text into a contemporary frame are absolutely non-existent. This becomes exemplified in the absurd depiction of the princes – as silly annoying creatures –, and the mismatch between the way to kill the enemies – a gun shot – and its textual verbalization (beheading with swords).

This type of adjustments had accurately been developed in former major Hollywood adaptations of Shakespeare to film, such as Baz Luhrman's William Shakespeare's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), in which the term "sword" is transposed to the brand of the guns used by Capulets and Montagues, or in *Hamlet* (2000) by Michael Almereyda, who places the Danish court within the executive hierarchy of a New York mass capitalist corporation. Rigola follows these proposals in the opening section of the performance, by placing Richard's first monologue in the bathroom, paralleling Ian McKellen in Richard Loncraine's *Richard III* (1995). However, this intertextual reference to one of the most widely awarded postmodern adaptations of *Richard III* gradually dilutes throughout the performance, as the bathroom is later confused with a sanctuary or even with the Tower of London itself. This divergence between text and performance leads the production to become exceedingly complex and unintelligible at certain points, especially for those members of the audience who do not have an extensive acquaintance with Shakespeare's original work.

Framed within this adaptation's deviances, the audience may also be baffled by some passages and sentences directly recited in English, generating the easy laugh from the viewers, who interpret that as a comic device, as they are not familiarized with the text in the English language. Thus, even though the adaptation follows the Spanish translation by Salvador Oliva, there are some occasions when it departs from it, precluding any sort of intended meaning, as the aforementioned English sentences show, and the unnecessary amount of swearwords and expletives uttered by Catsby when killing Buckingham and the princes.

In the handbill for the performance, Rigola mentions a well-known event of contemporary America: the Columbine massacre in 1999, where two teenage students carried out a shooting rampage at Columbine High School (Colorado), killing 12 fellow students and a teacher, as well as wounding 24 others, before committing suicide. Taking this fatal event as the epitome of teenage violence in the US, the handbill shoots some questions, such as "Is Europe gradually looking more like USA?, Haven't we grown up in a violent era such

as the one Richard saw in his childhood?, What do we want for our society? More Richards?" This initial approach, together with the projection on a wall of a quotation from the German philosopher Immanuel Kant about education ("Education is the only means through which a man can become a man. A man is only what education makes out of him") makes the audience reflect about the intention of the performance as centred on the fundamental role of education for the human being. However, as the play develops, we become aware of the complete mismatch between the expectations created in the handbill (and in the first seconds of staging) and the unconnected performance that follows.

The audience may thus be bound to think that the performance tries to present the perspective through which Rigola has approached *Richard III*, but this intention is gradually weakened as it is not reinforced in the actual representation. Therefore, this complete lack of cohesive markers in the staging of the play leads to an imbalance between the initial approach presented in the handbill together with the opening scene, and the development of the performance, with a teleological intention visible but not reinforced by any kind of dramatic input.

The Postmodern scenography also interplays with the notion of origin and authority including a picture of Shakespeare hung on the wall. Curiously enough, Shakespeare's portrait remains at the same level of a poster of the exuberant British model Katie Price, also known as 'Jordan' – stereotype of contemporary beauty through plastic surgery and frivolity –, and next to a "Red Bull" neon icon. The progressive entrance of actors wandering around the stage under the Bard's disguise – parodying the famous Droeshout portrait of Shakespeare – reinforce the physical staging of the aforementioned intertext concerning authority/authorship intended by Rigola. The dramatic effect of these clones of the Bard can be subject to a wide range of interpretations, although we may propose some possibilities: they make physical the formalist presence of the author in his representation – something which is not coherent with the postmodern approach of the *mise-en-scene* –; they might constitute a humorous allusion to the legendary Shakespeare and his popular folklore; they impersonate a figure – Shakespeare – who openly reads and copies from his fellow rival playwright Christopher Marlowe; or they could even be the personification of the ghosts that harass and torture Richard in act 5.

The staging of the final act constitutes an incongruent delirium without any apparent teleological coherence, apart from Richard's obvious decadence after reaching power and his well-known death at the battle of Bosworth. The ghosts that torture Richard and support Richmond are co-modified through their projection on the screen, with a gesture of affection, which is not clearly determined to whom it is addressed. This device builds up a highly hectic condensation of the final denouement of the play, as the ghosts visit neither Richard nor Richmond, and the famous sentential utterance "Despair and die" is simply ignored (5.3).

Besides, this is not the only editing displacement that is proposed, as Richmond does not appear as a physical presence, but as an ethereal entity, without the resulting emphasis regarding the opening of a new age with the crowning of Richmond (something present in Shakespeare and recovered with enormous mastery by Laurence Olivier's *Richard III*), probably suggesting a timeless and pessimistic approach within this interpretation of the play. Thus, Richard dies alone, killed by nobody, (there is not a physical Richmond) in an inexistent battleground (they are still in the 'Pub Occidental'), a character drown in an inexplicable rage or in an epileptic spasm (suggested previously when Catsby gives him a tablet).

The Shakespearean critical corpus agrees that in *Richard III* the Bard masterfully blends the development of the archetypical Machiavellian villain, the main character's psychic complexity as a being "determined to be a villain" by nature or nurture, the historical events that occurred in England during the late fifteenth century, and human cruelty as the major consequence of our constant desire for power. However, the show proposed by Teatre Lliure, though initially imaginative and disturbing, gradually loses weight and evolves into a sumptuous audiovisual display that promotes a pleasant entertainment, which is unfortunately equally disappointing under a critical light.

References

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