

PERFORMANCE REVIEWS*

Shakespeare in Almagro 2014: Hambret Festival Internacional de Teatro Clásico de Almagro La Veleta, 18 July 2014

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Director and adaptation: Jessica Walker

Actors: Ana Planes, Roser Vallvé, David Bocian, Julia Rabadán, Julieta Dentone, Angela F. Palacios, Karla Ontiveros, Camilo Zaffora, Mario González Aragón, Patrick Martino

Lighting: Natalia López Santacruz

Photography: Ulises Fontana

Setting, costumes, choreography and production: Laboratorio Teatro

* *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*.

On the occasion of the 450th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, the Almagro International Classical Theatre Festival offered eleven productions of his plays – six productions in the official programme and five at the Almagro Off, a contest for new creators established in 2011. Apart from the productions themselves, the festival also held two exhibitions related to Shakespeare: *Vestir a Shakespeare* [*Costumes for Shakespeare*], and *Shakespeare danzas y regocijos* [*Shakespeare dances and joys*]. In the official programme, productions such as *Los Macbeth*, directed by Andrés Lima, with Carmen Machi and Javier Gutierrez in the title roles, and *Othello*, by the company Noviembre Teatro, offered good examples of how Shakespeare has been performed on the Spanish stage in recent years. Whereas the first of these presents an updated version of the play, moving the Shakespearean tragedy to present-day Galicia (which might be considered the Spanish equivalent of Scotland thanks to its forests and *meigas*¹), the second is an abridged version of Shakespeare's play which deploys a mixture of contemporary and classic costumes and props, creating a timeless setting for the play.

In contrast to the official programme, the Almagro Off features more avant-garde and risky productions from new directors. A good example of this is *Hambret*, by the company Laboratorio Teatro, based in Barcelona and directed by Jessica Walker. The title is a combination of *Hamlet* and the Spanish word "hambre" ["hunger"], suggesting that the performance focuses on people's constant search for the satisfaction of their basic needs. The production attempts to dismember the text at the same time that it brings to life all the violence underlying human relations, in particular when love comes into view. The process of dismembering the Shakespearean play takes place as the plot is deconstructed; the performance not only does not remain close to the original play script, but it changes the order of the scenes and acts. Even though Shakespeare's words are only used in some key instances, such as in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, some of the topics of *Hamlet* dominate the production; love, violence and betrayal are the main issues addressed by the physical presence of the actors on the stage.

¹ "Meiga" is the name used to refer to witches in Galicia and other regions in the north of Spain.

Hambret combines strong visual instances of violence – with the actors slamming the floor with their leather jackets, jumping, running, shouting and throwing sand all over the stage – and more intimate moments with the performance of a monologue or a short scene following (sometimes but not always) Shakespeare’s text. The production works partly as a work-in-progress, given that what happens during those moments of violence is spontaneous. These instances of violence separate the different monologues and dialogues that form the text-based part of the production; but far from being used as a mere form of transition, they also invite the spectator to think about how violence is expressed. Although these transitions are choral, no more than three actors take part in the text-based scenes. Monologues and scenes with two characters prevail, with the “bedroom/closet scene” with Hamlet and Gertrude being a key moment. Another remarkable scene is one in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are re-imagined, performed by two women who reflect on identity and seduction using improvisation techniques while they address the audience directly.

The cast is composed of ten actors whose different backgrounds are soon foregrounded, as their accents and identities have a central role. An example of this is the actor playing Hamlet, who recites the “To be or not to be” soliloquy in French, his mother tongue. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern also use Catalan and English in their discourse, and several Latin American accents come into view in the performance of various other actors. The implications of coming from a specific place or being an actor – a common condition to all of those on the stage – are two of the issues raised for the audience’s reflection.

Apart from using strong visual language, other senses are involved. Smell is essential to the creation of the ambience, as incense bars are burnt during the show. Different levels of sensations arise: images of violence, the sound of accents, and the smell of incense. The inclusion of these elements evokes ancient rites; in fact, the ritual features are enhanced by the presence of the bodies on the stage, using physical theatre techniques closer to those of Jerzy Grotowski. The constant presence of the director next to the stage, together with her intervention asking a question to one of the performers, recalls Tadeusz Kantor, another Polish director. Departing from the Eastern European tradition of physical theatre

and approaching post-dramatic practices, this production situates itself in the avant-garde, and reminds us that traditional forms of performance were challenged long ago in favour of new theatrical forms.

The prize awarded for the Almagro Off was not for Laboratorio Teatro, but for another company staging Shakespeare: Los Colochos Teatro, a Mexican company presenting a version of *Macbeth* under the title *Mendoza*. This version places the story in the Mexican Revolution of 1910, mixing Mexican traditions, history, and even national literature (there are several references to Juan Rulfo and Marta Garro). Macbeth is depicted as the general José Mendoza, who ends up becoming major of his regional division after Duncan's death. The actress in the role of Lady Macbeth – here called Rosario Mendoza – also plays the only witch of the production, who uses the typical imagery of Mexican witchcraft such as cockerels to exert her power over Mendoza. The ambience of the production is completely Mexican; the last scene shows the actors – except the one in the title role, who lies dead under a table – singing a *ranchera*² and offering Mexican beer to the audience, which subtly recalls Elizabethan stage jigs.

This is not the first time that a Shakespearean production by a foreign company has won the Almagro Off. In 2012 the Italian company Copione won the award with *Giulio Cesare*, an adaptation of *Julius Caesar*. The fact that the plays of the Almagro Off have to be based or inspired in works written in the “Universal Baroque,” that is, between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, seems to attract Shakespearean productions, in particular in the case of international new directors, who rely on Shakespeare's works to present their innovative approaches.

On the other hand, the exhibition “Vestir a Shakespeare” stands in contrast to most of the Shakespearean productions in the festival, as it exhibits the costumes that many acclaimed designers from the forties devised for Shakespeare productions shown on the Spanish stage. By comparing the exhibition and *Hambret* we can see how theatre costumes have evolved in the history of staging Shakespeare in Spain: whereas many of the costumes in the exhibition imitate Elizabethan attire, in *Hambret* actors wear modern dress with some

² A traditional Mexican song.

hints of classical costumes, such as the scarves worn by the male actors. The second exhibition, "Shakespeare, danzas y regocijos," is perhaps closer to the production by Laboratorio Teatro. It is a collection of 50 illustrations by the artist Pablo Márquez based on *The Tempest*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and various flowers and plants mentioned in Shakespeare's plays. The illustrations mix different techniques, with a predominance of collage. The series on *The Tempest* is based on sixteenth-century war maps, the *Dream* collection uses seventeenth-century ballet designs, and flowers and plants are combined for the last series. The illustrations mix Shakespeare's quotations, collage, and drawing. The effect of this mixture of techniques is similar to that of *Hambret* in the sense that both the theatrical and pictorial productions attempt to create a renewed vision of Shakespeare; it does not matter whether the main focus is on violence or on visual beauty. Both the exhibition and the production are an example of how artists from different fields use Shakespeare to give imaginative form to their own personal interpretations of the works of the English poet. Two exhibitions and eleven theatrical productions, thirteen different views on Shakespeare in total, have turned The Almagro International Classical Theatre Festival into a real celebration of Shakespeare's 450th anniversary.

How to cite this review:

Guerrero, Isabel. "Shakespeare in Almagro 2014: *Hambret* [Performance Review]." *SEDERI* 25 (2015): 219-23.

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