

MODERN INTERPRETATIONS OF SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET

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The problems of Shakespeare's heroes do not belong in the distant past. They always live in the human psyche and behavior. The function of theater is to recreate these dramas by transferring and reenacting them in a familiar national, political, or social context. Recently, Georgian viewers have seen numerous interesting interpretations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Among them I would single out four different concepts of *Hamlet* by two Lithuanian and two Georgian world-famous directors: Nekrošius, Koršunovas, Sturua and Tsuladze.

Robert Sturua has staged *Hamlet* several times, with the first performance in 1992 at the Riverside Studios, London, followed by the Satyricon theater in Moscow in 1998. In Tbilisi, the premiere of *Hamlet* took place in 2002 at Rustaveli Theater. It is not surprising that the director has revisited what is known as Shakespeare's most philosophical play on several occasions, a play allowing for more and more interpretations and emphases. What more does Robert Sturua want to tell us at the beginning of the 21st century by staging *Hamlet*? What more does fate have in store for Hamlet?

In *Hamlet*, drama and irony, characteristic of Robert Sturua's signature directing, coexist. Classical and slapstick styles take turns. The characters of the play transform into participants of a tragic slapstick show. In *Hamlet*, the director portrays a world with interweaving parallel layers, with the boundaries between reality and fiction erased. The transition from one state to another, from one dimension to another, is unnoticeable, using minimal strokes. The scene is not overloaded with scenery (production designer M. Shvelidze). Scenography and costumes do not define time. *Hamlet*, its scenography, music, composition, and structure were also constructed in such a way as to represent the whole and the part, fragmentation and unity, characteristic of Robert Sturua's theatrical language—and all that serves the

purpose of conveying the director's vision.

According to the director's interpretation, Zaza Papuashvili's *Hamlet* is controversial both inwardly and outwardly. Sometimes a clown full of irony and cynicism, sometimes foolish, and shrewd at times, sometimes cruel, sometimes sincere, gentle, and sometimes ferocious and ardent, and sometimes romantic. His actions or emotional state change in different situations. In the scene of the meeting between Hamlet and his father's ghost, the director uses body language to emphasize the spiritual unity of father and son. In *Hamlet*, Robert Sturua reiterates the issue of hunger for power, among others. This time, Claudius kills his brother to seize power. Notably, in *Hamlet*, none of the significant monologues is fully delivered in verbal form.

There is no separation of genres in *Hamlet*. Instead, there is a mix of tragedy, psychological drama, farce, comedy, and others. In this performance, similar to Robert Sturua's other works, every detail is developed with mathematical precision. The basis of each episode is truth, as a result of which, this seeming eclecticism is united into a single composition. During the performance, the viewers witness this force of nature intensify to reach the apex of dizzying motion the finale, at which point it shakes the universe. And after this universal shudder there is silence. In the face of this force, man is small and powerless. He is completely alone. Or rather, he feels himself abandoned, seized by a feeling of helplessness and sadness. But a man himself is to blame for all this, since he has aroused these forces against himself, creating problems that act independently of him. 21st-century man realizes that he has reached a dead-end, that his life story is over. And the fear of a tragic end captures him completely.

Eimuntas Nekrošius uses every means in *Hamlet* to keep revenge, murder, blood, and loathing implicit, not on

the surface, lest they eclipse the love inspiring Hamlet until the very end.

During the performance, there is water constantly “spilled” on the stage. Goblets of different sizes are filled with water to be enjoyed by characters once in a while.... The element of water often appears in the form of ice to be part of the first “ritual” in the play, meaning the scene of the meeting of Hamlet with the ghost: the ghost emerging from darkness takes off a white fur coat and remains in a black robe and washes Hamlet’s legs and arms with shards of ice, who is blindfolded by Horatio (Ramunas Rudokas). Hamlet, blindfolded, avoids looking at the ghost, but finally opens his eyes and looks at him, shivering with cold, as though feeling the otherworldly cold.... After that, there are water and ice on the stage all the time, fragments of which sometimes are hung from the ceiling around the serrated plate, sometimes thrown into large goblets, or thrown on the floor. Against the elements appearing along with the ghost, they light a fire on the stage, or bring hot water to melt the ice. The director feels sorry for Ophelia stuck between the two elements. Hamlet sacrifices her love for revenge, and Ophelia, approaching him, throws pieces of ice in her cleavage. She wants somehow to keep the one who understands her and whom she understands better than anyone else. The director uses all four elements in the performance, some ascribed deadly powers, and others used transformation.

Nekrošius does not explicitly indicate the place and time of action. His task is to maintain theatrical conditionality and, at the same time, avoid jewelry, clothing, and other dazzling objects indicative of luxury, a task fulfilled by the creative team (costume designer Nadežda Gultiajeva, lighting designer Audrius Jankauskas) extremely well. Faustas Latenas’s music perfectly underpins this mood.

Claudius’s monologue, who is left alone, is remarkable. He is seized by the fear of crime like an ordinary mortal. After all, Hamlet’s revenge is caused by his “crime.” Vytautas Rumšas’s emotional monologue, his character’s spiritual condition, heralds the coming of “eternal silence”. Hamlet, who remains onstage in silence and darkness, reads the monologue “to be or not to be” under a serrated plate, a symbol of “the time out of joint.” Although the scene of Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s visit is removed from Nekrošius’s performance, the director does not skip a single famous monologue.

The significance of the ghost as the driving force of revenge becomes even clearer in Nekrošius’s performance. Most become victims of revenge. Hamlet dies from a spear in battle, and the scene of the ghost’s mourning is the last and most impressive in the play. Deceased Hamlet holds a drum in his hands (“weapon” for waking, to raise the alarm), which the ghost cannot pull out of his hand, beating it and crying loudly, a scene repeated several times, the last time in the middle of the scene, when father finally bids farewell and his sobbing is accompanied by the magical sound of the gong.

Oskaras Koršunovas staged Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in 2008, marking a new phase in the director’s creative work, as well as for the OKT (Oskar Koršunovas Theatre) created by him. Koršunovas begins researches, searches, so-called laboratory work.

Koršunovas builds the concept of the performance on scenography (Oskaras Koršunovas, Agne Kuzmickaitė, lighting designer Antanas Jasenka). The main props of the scenery are nightstands on rollers, with bulbs and mirrors, which during the performance, along with the development of action, acquire different functions. There is nothing superfluous about scenography and lighting. Minimal lighting, contrast of white and black color, red color here and there: in the first act flashes on the rubber nose of a clown, and in the end creates an association of a bloody lake. Hamlet the philosopher, who seeks truth and meaning of his own being, bitterly encounters real life, and in the end becomes a victim of his own “game.” By the director’s concept, the audience is trapped. Those who are trapped try in vain to figure out, perceive, unravel the story, action, or form, reflected in the mirrors onstage.

Dressed in a Japanese costume, a young Ophelia, staying alone in the room at the beginning of the performance, plays a geisha. Then, dressed in a long wedding dress, ironed by her father Polonius, she dances to the Swan Song. Dressed in fashionable black leather, Gertrude drinks wine from the skull. Laertes feels sexual attraction to his own sister. The ghost of the father lies in the morgue made of the mirrored nightstands and plays the “actor,” who is also a “reflection” of Claudius. The “red-nosed” creature, walking along the stage, in the end turns out to be Horatio, ridiculed by the director and presented as a clown. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, disguised as women, with a bouquet of red roses, turn into

“sailors” as one creature in the last scene of the play.

The director constantly puts the audience on the verge of the real and the unreal. The so-called “toilet” roller mirrors onstage, along with other things, hint at Shakespeare’s metaphor “life is theater.” By the principle of mirror reflection, the director tells us that the actors and spectators participating in the life-theater vainly “philosophize,” search for the meaning of life, truth, because after all only “eternal silence” will come....

In *Hamlet*, staged at the Marjanishvili Theater in Georgia in 2018, according to the concept of **Levan Tsuladze**, the world is immersed in a maelstrom of dirt and filth. That is why the whole action of the play takes place in a basement laundry. The dirty world needs to be cleaned up. The scenography belongs to the director. In the depths of the stage there is a vast landscape of the sea on a framed screen which, as events unfold, depicts sometimes images of the sun setting in the sea, sometimes fireworks, sometimes cloudy, stormy skies, and raging seas. These images on the screen are like a world of dreams, from which the reality in the laundry differs drastically. That is a dream, and this is real life. The video shots of Nika Machaidze are visual and emotional expressions of the psychic or mental state of the characters and the actions in the play.

I would like to emphasize another interesting detail conceived by the director. In the play, the troupe goes to the Elsinore Castle. There is one elderly actor in the performance of Marjanishvili Theater. According to the director, the ghost and the actor are one and the same person. When Nika Tavazde’s Claudius realizes that Hamlet has set a trap for him, he steps aside and pretends to be talking on a cell phone. Akaki Khidasheli’s actor takes off his wig and turns into the ghost. The director stages this scene in such an artistic way that the audience can perceive it as Claudius’s imaginary conscience or a mystical event. Akaki Khidasheli’s ghost is a pompous tyrant, but the actor is so old that his hands shake, and he stammers. While playing, his hands no longer tremble, he does not stutter, and he plays the roles of Gonzago and his wife in a heroic style.

During the adaptation of the play Lasha Bugadze and Levan Tsuladze made several changes, deleting some sections of the text, shuffling them, reducing the number of characters, combining several characters into one. The characters have changed with a shift of accents.

This performance is not only a story of betrayal, revenge, human pride, and the dirty world, but also a love story. It is different, but it is also a love story of Claudius and Gertrude, Hamlet and Ophelia, followed by the song of Simon and Garfunkel as a leitmotif (music adaptation by Zurab Gagloshvili).

Who is Nika Kuchava’s Hamlet? A man seeking revenge for justice, a fighter, a young man in love or a victim? Probably all in one. His own parents doomed him. His mother married his uncle early, which was completely unacceptable for him, and he was saddened by this. But he would get used to it, if not for the obligation imposed by his tyrant father with a call for revenge. After that, Hamlet’s life no longer belongs to him.

Levan Tsuladze *Hamlet’s* finale is highly effective and clearly expresses the director’s concept. Akaki Khidasheli’s ends the performance with the last chord, blows and puts out the only lamp hanging above Horatio’s head. Darkness comes around. The tyrant king fulfills his wish—revenge exacted. Most members of the dirty world he created are dead, even his own son. But this does not bother him at all, and most importantly, he satisfied his own ambitions.

In every performance that I have seen, the ghost is ascribed a different meaning. It is because of the ghost that the tragedy breaks out in the play. Robert Sturua’s ghost is a grotesque, monster-like creature, but with Nekrošius he is a tragic creature urging his son to revenge, and in the finale, when he realizes that he has sacrificed his son for the sake of revenge, he bemoans over his body with a heartbreaking howl. Koršunovas’s ghost represents an “actor” who is the face of his own killer, Claudius. According to Levan Tsuladze’s concept, Akaki Khidasheli’s ghost is an arrogant tyrant who destroys everyone and everything and does not hesitate to sacrifice his own son for revenge.

Sturua’s Hamlet surrenders to fate. His behavior, his attitude towards evil and treachery existing in the world seem odd. He no longer asks why accursed fate has allotted him to set the broken joint; it is inevitable, so he accepts it.

In Eimuntas Nekrošius’s *Hamlet*, love is sacrificed for revenge, which Hamlet is forced to take. In the foreground there is love rather than revenge. First of all, love for the characters that the director molds, and then Hamlet’s love for others....

Oskaras Koršunovas calls *Hamlet* a theatrical “mousetrap”, a “trap” that one of the main characters, Hamlet, uses not only to capture the king’s conscience, but also to seize his own “illusions.”

According to Levan Tsuladze’s concept, Hamlet is sometimes a funny young man, sometimes a tender lover, sometimes a vengeful person, and sometimes a person “wounded in the brain,” driven to insanity by watch-

ing the dirty world.

“Shakespeare’s plays are, to a large extent, the history of various theatrical styles that prompted actors, directors and artists to sculpt Shakespeare’s plays in their own way.”¹ Robert Sturua, Eimuntas Nekrošius, Oskaras Koršunovas, Levan Tsuladze have staged peculiar, interesting, differently seen performances of *Hamlet* in the 21st century.

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¹ Брук П. Шекспир. 1964. №2. стр. 8.