

Refreshing Remodelling of the Classics

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Abstract: This paper deals with several reinterpretations and rewritings of classic texts by two directors, Susanne Kennedy and Silviu Purcărete. The theoretical framework is represented by Hans-Thies Lehmann's idea of postdramatic theatre, but also by the reflection on how technological media change the way we look at classical texts. If Susanne Kennedy is passionate about Internet dramaturgy and technical devices, Silviu Purcărete, a director inspired by a visuality of pictorial origin, resorts to a more metaphorical-symbolic way of deconstructing the dramatic texts.

Keywords: Susanne Kennedy, Silviu Purcărete, postdramatic theatre, technological devices, rewritings, scenical interpretations.

In the abundant and dynamic landscape of new theatrical languages, the updating remodelling of classics has become one of the main modes of stage expression. Theatrical practice has been undergoing since the 1960s and 1970s a multitude of creatively ingenious retellings ranging from the actual rewriting of dramatic anthology texts to the redrafting on stage through directorial writing as a gesture of creative emancipation. Detachment from the opera-prima by reimagining it from the ground up becomes a creative strategy. Deconstruction,

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fragmentarism, collage, repetition, stylistic hybridization retract the aesthetics of actuality. Performing art moves away from representation, it also becomes experience.

Susanne Kennedy, technologized theatricality

In 2017, the jury deciding the Europe Theatre Prizes awarded the “New Theatrical Realities” prize to Susanne Kennedy. At the award ceremony, *The Virgin Suicides*,¹ based on the novel by Jeffrey Eugenides, illustrated her stage rhetoric of investigating homicide through technology. A literary prose was elaborately filtered through new media translating literary narrative into a technologized stage product. In the new scenario, words were an element of a nonlinearly architected, multi-focused, sequenced, evolving scenic “package.” The dramatic rewriting focused on elements of social actuality, generational codes, defining characteristics of generations Y and Z – the need for popularity/public visibility, attachment to the virtual environment, anxiety, tacit need for love, emotional confusion, gender fluidity, exploding sexuality, etc. The stage actions were dispersed in a scenographic frontality (Lena Newton), a montage of showcases, integrated screens, tubes, steps, in which animated tableaux in quasi-simultaneous succession followed the logic of a software that quickly opens “window” after “window”. Frames resumed in a stream of individuals, objects, videos, moving photographs, images of signifying power runned in a loop, dispersed in multiple planes.

The artistic turning point was radical, bringing together two worlds: the human one – with artists as living presences, but very different from the way performance art has done it until 2017; and the one of electronic devices that flood our existences. Actors took on the appearance of androids through uniform masks; voices detached from the transmitter and passed through technical circuits attached a freezing effect. The value of replay in an imagistic loop was amplified as a source of computer-like perception. The neon lights

¹ Oltița Cîntec, “Digitalizarea umanului” [“Digitization of the Human”], in *Fereastră către digital. Teatrul și noile tehnologii. Open New Tab. Theatre and New Technology*, ed. Oltița Cîntec (Iași: Junimea, 2021), 183-204.

imprinted an unreal halo, joined the accumulation of constituents that transported the audience into the reality beyond the screen that the German-born director theatrically three-dimensionalized. The ordering elements of the aesthetic discourse came from the sphere of the digital, they were a temporal slot that materialized the electronic imaginary. It was a hypnotic performativity. Abrogating canonical emotional legacies, Kennedy established a theatricality centred on the characteristics of the electronic universe. In many of her interviews she returns to the concern of studying the body-technology relationship. She does so by investigatively linking the body, technological objects, and intelligent machines.

Postdramatic theatre, Hans-Thies Lehmann's cultural construct, proposed in the early 2000s a new theoretical order in the agglomeration of theatrical formulas that had invaded the performative space. The researcher's perspective is based on a fresh investigation of the relationship between creators and text, the starting point of stage performance for centuries:

The adjective 'postdramatic' denotes a theatre that feels bound to operate beyond drama, at a time 'after' the authority of the dramatic paradigm in theatre. [...] This describes postdramatic theatre: the limbs or branches of a dramatic organism, even if they are withered material, are still present and form the space of a memory that is 'bursting open' in a double sense. [...] Postdramatic theatre thus includes the presence or resumption or continued working of older aesthetics, including those that took leave of the dramatic idea in earlier times, be it on the level of text or theatre.²

The classification of the German director as a representative of postdramatic theatre (she does not appear in Lehmann's list for chronological reasons) is scientifically correct. Her creations favour the multimedia component, digitised formulas that make massive use of new technologies whose aesthetic utility she exploits scenically. It is equally appropriate to include Kennedy in the list of those who make a posthuman art, as the

² Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, translated by Karen Jürs-Munby (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 27.

presence and contribution of the actor in his traditional sense are eclipsed by multimedia. The human is transfigured through the filters offered by new technologies as creative tools. This double possible affiliation represents her creative universe in its best aspects.

In Susanne Kennedy's theatrical practice, the actor personifies figures drawn from the online sphere after the models of pixel creatures, imitating the patterns of web platforms, and takes on the role of a guide for the spectator in a new practice of reception. The performers are masked in order to bring them characteristically close to androids and to serialize them. They mechanically mimic texts that echo from amplification. The voices are not their own, the emission is taken over by audio software, the amplification releases pre-recorded utterances with other voices, of those who know nothing about the stage context. Many lines are taken from blogs, YouTube, the internet in general, processed and released on stage in robotic tones.

I'm very much working with hypertext dramaturgy... so what I do is, I have a scene and in the scene, someone says something, and then I Google it, I find a YouTube video of it, I find the comments underneath, and I use them. I type them out or I just copy-paste them, and then I record that, and I put them into the piece. So it's like people commenting on the scene that's being played and talking about the scene in YouTube comments underneath. And so you get a kind of Internet dramaturgy that I like a lot actually. Because that's how we live and work – it's really our dramaturgy of this time.³

The actor hypostatizes computerised synthesis, does not creatively reproduce life, but embodies its digital version. Concrete reality is no longer enough, we are drawn to all other possible worlds. The audience is not looking at an electronic device, it has stepped inside it, it has passed the display. The digital leaves the processors and is born on the live stage, and human presences become part of it. Internet dramaturgy, masks, playback, multimedia become the fundamental items of Susanne Kennedy's aesthetic cosmos. The director rethinks theatre in a conceptualised way.

³ "In Conversation: Susanne Kennedy", <https://www.draff.net/susanne-kennedy.html> (Accessed September 2023).

Drei Schwester/Three Sisters was imagined as a performative installation at the Münchner Kammerspiele. The spatial arrangement of the stage juggles with angles and perspectives, the straight ones of the classical stage include a projection screen that takes on volume through 3D projections. A windows-like structuring announces the aesthetic intentions. At the beginning of the performance, bizarre sounds can be heard in the darkness, which make you think of a processor. After a while, Masha, Olga and Irina emerge, their faces obscured by various types of black mask (textile at first, latex later), in white crinolines, spinning like dervishes against the hallucinatory backdrop of accelerating clouds that include them. The spectators are offered a fluid suite of slides, 41 in number, delineated by cuts (also announced vocally). The high degree of abstraction does not annihilate the pictorial-digital beauty.

The theatre as a space metamorphoses into a huge electronic device of aseptic whiteness displaying virtual frames incorporating fragmented, replayed live actions, segmented by black cuts. Three actresses and three actors transfer their characters to each other in plain sight, changing their clothing (some of them vintage – at one point the girls are in waxed clothing with white beanies, some in today's casual attire), shifting in time, resembling moving window mannequins and androids. But they remain in the same actions, vaguely interacting, everything repeated with minimal variation. The visual and historical context changes, not the stories. The sisters are trapped in time, there are no clear temporal boundaries. They wear a costume that camouflages their bodies and heads, only their eyes are visible, like strange cyborgs “playing” Chekhovian themes. They are serial beings, copies of a multiplied model, robotic characters with mechanised gestures. The sound space is digital, the voices are computer processed and collage mounted, it sounds artificial but endearing, like everything else you see. Part of the associated sonorities, the edited voices take on an electronic musicality, whose polyphonic composition was the work of sound designer Richard Janssen. The technically mediated voice, artificially altered, detached from its sender, means the autonomisation of speech, its removal from its classical semantic function. *Three Sisters* is a 3D unfolding, the characters are interchangeable in the closed perimeter that holds them captive. Their hope is deceptive, “to Moscow, to

Moscow!" a kind of paradise of personal salvation that remains Edenic because it is intangible. In the end the images are deliberately pixelated, "The End is never the End" is heard on loop, then "final cut".

The dramaturgy has kept a small part of Chekhov's lines, even those adapted to the new conceptual circumstances (Vershinin, for example, is heard from a telephone hanging on a wall). The bulk is made up of phrases picked up from the internet, everyday phrases, some strange, unrelated to each other and to the source play, few in number, integrated into the electronic register. They are part of the sum of content arranged in a visuality imagined by Markus Helg. There are deliberate variations in rhythm, sequences are repeated in a loop, sometimes with the impression of rewind and fast forward. Chekhov's sisters remain confined to some of the play's first act moments and relive them. They replay the same lines, they say others announced as "reality", with no connection to Chekhov, about jobs, personal life, but also about theatre and the circularity of time, a metatext introduced by Kennedy as a sign of the temporal rift and the numerous realities around. The starting point is a ready-made, Chekhov's play, which the director edits originally by calling on multimedia algorithms. The nonlinear, multi-focal inner logic destroys the codes of traditional fictions, favouring montage in a numerical type of structuring. A scenographic and actorly immateriality creates the feeling that we are ourselves, as viewers, in the world inside an electronic device and we are appropriating its rules.

Double Rewriting

"What if?..." is the premise of Radu F. Alexandru's play *Gertrude*, staged by Silviu Purcărete at the "I.L. Caragiale" National Theatre, Bucharest. The director's scenic signature includes creative intervention on the texts that caught his attention. To refer only to Shakespeare, to whom he returned cyclically, he remixed the shakespearean texts, in the early 1990s, in a performance of daring originality in which he combined Alfred Jarry's *Ubu* and William Shakespeare's

Macbeth, under the title *Ubu Rex with Scenes from Macbeth*.⁴ The rewriting is based on the combination of two authors and two plays that, in essence, speak of the same theme – the thirst for power, only in different registers, one in grotesque absurdity, the other in tragedy. Pucărete says so himself, evoking “a certain stylistic consonance between Shakespeare and Jarry, which is, however, somehow achieved in reverse. That is to say, Jarry’s style could be Shakespeare’s style turned inside out or read backwards. Like an inverted tape recorder or a photographic negative.”⁵ The director has superimposed dramatic levels and registers, cleverly playing with possible similarities between characters imagined centuries apart. The dominant narrative line is from *Ubu* and the presence of the Macbeth couple is a kind of halo of amplification by their mere presence, an associative reference to characters with brutal endings. A connection of meaning is identifiable here: the prototypical alpha-female, who feeds male pride and greed for power through her own ambitions, in a destructive complementarity.

An interesting quotation from Shakespeare's time is the recourse to transvestism⁶. Valer Dellakeza is Madam Ubu, Mirela Cioabă is Blegoslav, Minela Zamfir is Ladislav and Roxana Pera is Boleslav. The intentions of the mizanscene do not go along the lines of trickery, of hiding the biological gender, the idea is to increase the grotesque, another directorial way of rewriting the starting dramatic text. Pucărete has done it before in another of his projects, Molière’s *Dom Juan*⁷ in Limoges, when the cast was all female,⁸ a decision that changed the scenic perspective of the classic text.

⁴ “Marin Sorescu” National Theatre, Craiova, 1990.

⁵ Patrel Berceanu, *Ubu Rex cu scene din Macbeth. Monografia unui eveniment teatral. Un spectacol de Silviu Pucărete [Ubu Rex with Scenes from Macbeth. Monograph of a Theatrical Event. A Performance by Silviu Pucărete]* (Craiova: Aius, 2000), 44-45.

⁶ Oltița Cîntec, “Genul biologic, genul scenic” [“Biological Gender, Scenical Gender”], *Territorii de recuperat. Teatrul prin lentile de gen/Territories to Recover. Theatre through Gender Lens*, ed. Oltița Cîntec, translated by Carmen Tărniceru, Mircea Sorin Rusu (Iași: Editura Junimea, 2023).

⁷ Théâtre de l’Union Limoges/ CDN du Limousin, 1998.

⁸ Oltița Cîntec, “Molière. Original revisitatie”, *Concept* 25, 2 (2022): 122-132.

When he staged *Titus Andronicus*,⁹ the first staging of this play in Romania, he shortened it mercilessly, and the manner of staging continued the approach along the lines of a cinematic unfolding, with emphasis on the force of visuality. “The play, transferred to the stage, is no longer just Shakespeare’s play. It becomes, phenomenologically, to the same extent, Silviu Purcărete’s play; and only from there, after the dramaturgical re-creation, it becomes an aesthetic object operable by scenic means: a new (textual) structure tending towards a new (scenic) structure.”, says Patrel Berceanu who witnessed the rehearsal process.¹⁰ Out of a total of more than 2,000 verses, the director has, for the most part, dropped almost half of them from the stage. It was a verbal pruning operation, on the one hand, out of the need to bring the centuries-old text, which linguistically seems unsuited to the 20th century, into the spirit of the times, and on the other, to make room for scenic theatricality and dynamic visuality. The rhetoric of the scenic image, a constant of current cultural events, is preferred to the verbal rhetoric typical of the Elizabethan era. The intervention in the text also consisted in moving some lines to other characters or in the duet utterance of some words, for the same reasons of logical clarity. The adaptation in the mentioned form was made from a stage perspective, not a pre-composed script. The contribution to its configuration is collective, with classic devised procedures, the coordinator being the stage director. The artist managed them in relation to his own vision, but also to the proposals of the actors and the other collaborators, in a subtle work in progress during which the solutions appeared on the fly. The new version of the text was conditioned by the performance plan, the spectacular took precedence over the dramaturgical. In other words, we are also dealing with a rereading on a semantic level, with an archaeology in the folds of the play. Dans Monah states that: “Sans doute, tous les spectacles ne sont-ils pas de réécriture, mais il y en a qui invitent le spectateur à les considérer non pas comme des mises en scène, des interprétations d’un texte donné, mais plutôt comme des œuvres d’auteur, qui prennent le texte comme point de départ,

⁹ “Marin Sorescu” National Theatre, Craiova, 1992.

¹⁰ Patrel Berceanu, *Monografia unui eveniment teatral. Titus Andronicus* [Monograph of a Theatrical Event. *Titus Andronicus*] (Craiova: Aius, 1997): 5.

et les transforment au moyen de techniques similaires à celles des *réécritures* dramatique.”¹¹

There are countless ways to reimagine classic writings. Some construct possibilities that precede the actual action, others continue it after the initial denouement. Some move the action to different spaces and times. Others rethink the characters' intimate personality, or juxtapose them in terms of their contribution to the conflict. Such a creative formula is what we are dealing with in *Gertrude*. This is basically a double rewriting. The first is the playwright's attempt to apply new insights into *Hamlet*, proposing a hypothesis that sheds light on the nooks and crannies of the Shakespearean conflict. The second comes from the interpretive interventions that emerged in the course of working on the stage, in the production team led by the director.

The dramatically developed hypothesis holds that Hamlet is the illegitimate child of Claudius, the fruit of a long love affair that preceded the King's marriage to Gertrude. The love has also fuelled the desire to remove the authoritarian occupant of the throne from the scene. Radu F. Alexandru's development also follows ideologically along the lines of the approach in Margaret Atwood's short story *Gertrude Talks Back*, making the titular hero's mother a powerful character who takes on the action. From this point radiates a progressive series of adjustments of the *dramatis personae*, condensed to six (Gertrude, Claudius, Hamlet, Ophelia, Polonius, Horatio). The plausibility of the authorial premise fails to raise the play to the level of that from which it derived artistically. Gertrude does not rise above the level of a plausible "what if...", enriched at the level of meaning by the directorial perspective.

Purcărete returned to the minimalism of his early productions (*Phaedra*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Danaïdes*, etc.) with summary scenography that leaves generous room for the actors and the scenic images. As for *Gertrude*, the reimagining preserves the Shakespearean setting – the royal court of Denmark, but the temporal-spatial contextualisation has been given a wider opening by the

¹¹ Dana Monah, *Shakespeare et ses doubles. Essai sur la réécriture théâtrale* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2017), 127. Original text, translated by me: "Of course, not all shows are rewritings, but some invite the spectator to consider them not as stagings, interpretations of a given text, but rather as works of authorship, which take the texts as their point of departure, and transform them using techniques similar to those of dramatic rewritings."

scenographic component. Dragoș Buhagiar, in line with the director's vision, chose the black box and a few objects whose usual value becomes symbolic; the costumes leave room for the combination of historical eras and geographical spaces, giving up a precise location.¹² An ingenious mechanism, made of black mobile panels, shows or hides, as the case may be, moments of the action, focusing the audience's gaze, giving it a cinematic dynamic, a kind of *close-up* with theatrical tools.

Playwright and director become Shakespeare's doppelgangers, as Dana Monah names them,¹³ creatively revisiting the bard through reinventing procedures. The heroes are also reshaped. Hamlet is a decade younger, refuses to be king, chooses to retire to Wittenberg, only to postpone his departure for a few days under pressure from his mother, then ends tragically. Ophelia remains the least developed character in the play; Horatio is a pawn with influence over Hamlet; Claudius is soft compared to Gertrude's versatility and desire for greatness, i.e. manoeuvrable; Polonius is unscrupulous, submissive with those on whom he depends, domineering with his family subordinates.

A technique that, we have seen, Purcărete has used before, returns here: all the roles are played by men. The transvestism changes perspective, it occurs in full view, Gertrude (Claudiu Bleonț) doesn't thin her voice, doesn't control her gait or posture, her gender is obvious. The director's thought is to emphasise the inner strength of the Queen, who goes all the way to fulfil her dreams. Ophelia (Lari Giorgescu) does the same, she doesn't disguise anything, she remains within Shakespearean parameters, a discreet presence, subject to the suggestions of her father who advises her to do anything to conquer Hamlet. Her vulnerability leads to suicide.

In this case, we have a series of rewritings and reinterpretations. Radu F. Alexandru's play shifts the dramatic focus from Hamlet to Gertrude. It was followed, in the work on stage, by the reimagining of this derivative work by means typical of the theatrical discourse of Silviu Purcărete and his creative team, a process of reshaping a classic text through multiple imaginative interventions.

¹² Oltița Cîntec, "Când Gertrude devine elementul Alfa" ["When Gertrude becomes the Alpha Element"], *Observator cultural* nr. 1185, 24 nov. 2023.

¹³ Dana Monah, *Shakespeare et ses doubles. Essai sur la réécriture théâtrale*.

Conclusions

Adaptation, rereading, reinterpretation, rewriting, set writing, directorial writing, reinvention, the renunciation of the words in favour of visuality or digital theatricality have become ways of bringing the classics back into the aesthetic vibration of the contemporary moment. Regardless of the forms they take, all variations bring back works that have stood the severe test of time. They fascinate us by their power to adapt to contemporaneity, ensuring their public actuality. The examples I have used are just two of a long list of names and versions that attest to the inexhaustibility of theatrical creativity, the internal resources of the performing arts to reinvent themselves.

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Web resources

“In Conversation: Susanne Kennedy”, <https://www.draff.net/susanne-kennedy.html>
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