

THE FIRST STAGINGS OF SHAKESPEARE IN UKRAINE

The history of the staging of Shakespearian plays in Ukrainian is comparatively young. The reasons for this, first of all, may be found, on the one hand, in the prohibition by the Russian Tsarist regime of staging of any foreign plays translated into Ukrainian. There are records of some attempts to stage fragments of Shakespearian works in private homes. On the other hand, the absence of a permanent Ukrainian theatre did not create favourable grounds for essential work needed for the preparation of Shakespearian productions. After a long tradition of ethnographic theatre, even the first stationary troupe in Kiev did not have the necessary capability. Only with the establishment of state theatres in Ukraine was a more suitable atmosphere created for the realization of such productions. Thus the planning of the enthusiastic group The Young Theatre (directed by Les' Kurbas) to stage a complete Shakespearian play was met as a natural event. Yet, soon the Civil War in Ukraine brought in new difficulties. Severe living conditions prevailed in Kiev in 1920 where, at this time, The Young Theatre found itself.

The famine in Kiev, and attempts to use The Young Theatre as one device of propaganda, forced its initiator, L. Kurbas, and his followers to look for better opportunities on the periphery. But there was a third reason — L. Kurbas' desire to improve the artistic level of the troupe, which could be easily achieved had they been granted a fund for existence. In pursuit of these objectives, a group of enthusiasts headed by Kurbas left for Bila Tserkva in the summer of 1920; that fall they arrived in Uman with a new name, the Kiev Drama Theatre, historically known as Kiidramte.

The theatre, while on the outskirts, occupied itself with intensive training to develop the flexibility and the feeling of rhythm of its members. This covered classical ballet, acrobatics, fencing and orthoepy. They also studied the works of Diderot and Coquelin, particularly *Paradoxe sur le comedien* and *L'art du comedien*.

Kiidramte appeared with the following repertoire: *The Mistress of the Inn* by C. Goldoni; *The Marriage* by N. Gogol; *Woe to Him Who Lies* by F. Grillparzer; *The Youth* by M. Halbe; *The Haydamaks* by L. Kurbas (based on Shevchenko's poem); two of V. Vynnychenko's plays; an evening of O. Oles' sketches; and a play *The New Editor*, adapted from Mark Twain. The greatest event of the first season was the production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (the premiere taking place on August 20, 1920 in Bila Tserkva).¹ This tragedy was performed for the first time on the Ukrainian stage and also was the first production of a complete Shakespearian work in the Ukrainian language. Kurbas was both producer and leading actor. Other lead roles were performed by Lubov Hakkebush (Lady Macbeth), Vasyi Vasyi'ko (Banquo), and Hnat Ihnatovych (MacDuff). The choreography was staged by Valentyna Chystiakova, and properties were managed by Faust Lopatynsky. The translation of the tragedy was a nineteenth century one by the famous Ukrainian writer, Panteleimon Kulish.

In preparing this production, the members of Kiidramte showed great enthusiasm. The production had no painted scenery; the stage was decorated with black draperies; and the costumes were made by the performers themselves after a careful investigation of iconography. They also prepared the properties. The troupe was not large, requiring some actors to play two or more roles. The small details from the poster of this production clearly

illustrate the period of War Communism. The poster announces that by the order of the commandant of the garrison, tickets for the performance were to serve as passes after midnight; and that the prices for the tickets ranged from 200 to 1,000 carbovanets because of the current instability of money.

The reason why Kurbas chose *Macbeth* was that he believed this play provided excellent material both for the education of young actors and the introduction to them of another theatrical genre. Kurbas also felt that *Macbeth*, in providing an opportunity for actors to polish their own abilities, tested the strength of the young ensemble in the genre of tragedy. Kurbas demanded of actors that they should disregard their subconscious, accidental naturalistic feelings which were stimulated by their moods and by their psychic condition. The demand, rather, was for precise, very clear form, and a complete elimination of improvisation, which was so widely used by actors of the naturalistic school.

The critics responded to this production in different ways. At first there was very little acclaim, followed by negative reviews. Nevertheless, the importance of this production lies in other aspects. It was a most daring experiment at that time to stage this Shakespearian tragedy in contemporary style. It was a reading of the great author in a style completely different from any hitherto known to the spectators.

Kurbas later revised this production of *Macbeth* in Berezhil' where its premiere took place on April 7, 1924 in Kiev. Opinions about the production were very divergent. One group of people, as well as many critics, sharply rejected the producer's right to change the classics. However, some voices were raised in Kurbas favor, among them that of the old critic, Mykhailo Mohylianskyi, who contended that, "Kurbas' staging of *Macbeth* was really a spring delight even though wise men and specialists attempted to drown it in a whole flood of questions of 'principle', the first of which is: should the classics, and especially Shakespeare, be modified? All the questions concerning 'principle' were simply boring because, actually, it is not so important whether joy comes in accordance with principle or contrary to it. As long as there is joy, there is artistic achievement! And by staging *Macbeth* Kurbas' talent as a director achieved a great victory, passed a difficult test and, by giving the viewer a classical tragedy with kings, witches, etc., presented the basic features of the profound intentions of the dramatic genius and poet of human passions... What else can be demanded of a director?"²

Adapting the Shakespearian text, leaving out some parts or adding new scenes as soldiers taking oath, or the coronation ceremony, Kurbas pursued one goal — the education of the spectators. He achieved it by introducing intermediaries, urging the portrayal of everyday problems of contemporary life, and using the elements of symbolic scenery. Frequently, the intermediaries had profound symbolic meaning. For example, after the third scene of the first act, in which the collaboration of the two main characters (*Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth*) takes place, Kurbas introduced a scene with Jesuit priests, an old devil and two small devils transformed into priests; in this transformation the hypocritical activities of *Macbeth* and his wife were re-emphasized.

The final interlude in Kurbas' production, the so-called 'leap-frog game of kings' — the pantomime-epilogue was a great success. *Macduff* takes *Macbeth's* head off a spear and proclaims a glory to the new king, an organ sounds... On the stage appears the *Buffoon* (a new character introduced by Kurbas) attired in the robes of a bishop and bearing a crown; the 'bishop'

crowns the kneeling Malcolm; the new king rises and steps aside; a new pretender for the throne kills him with a sword, takes his crown, approaches the buffoon-bishop, kneels before him and receives the crown; a new king rises, and yet another pretender for the throne appears on stage; again a killing... a coronation... darkness... the curtains...

The urgent everyday problems of contemporary life were included mainly in the speech of the buffoon-bishop. The appearance of actuality was greatly supported by the costumes of the performers, which consisted of a laborer's contemporary clothing and details of medieval attire. Macbeth was dressed in a long blouse of sackcloth, military trousers with boots and puttees. He wore a linen helmet, and, at his side, was a rapier. Sometimes to this costume was added a dark cloth with a white border. The witches' costumes consisted of grey-bluish suits with wide pants, and red wigs with forelocks. Banquo's murderers had worn the ordinary costumes of laborers, and small black capes provided the only difference between them and the spectators. The rest of the cast wore costumes similar to those of Banquo's murders, but, instead of capes, colourful pieces of material were sewn to their clothing.

The stage-designer, Vadim Meller, made conventional properties similar to that of an Elizabethan Shakespearian production:... "On to the stage, upholstered in black wool material, in a clockwise direction, shields were lowered one after another with colourful signs determining the location of action: 'Field', 'Macbeth's castle', etc. From time to time a green frame was lowered on thick cords. The curtain was not drawn at the end of a scene or an act"...?

Kurbas' production of *Macbeth* inspired theatre followers. In 1938 *Macbeth* was produced at the Donets Ukrainian Drama Theatre in Stalino. L. Hakkebush played the role of Lady Macbeth and V. Vasyl'ko was the producer — both were former participants of Berezhil'. However, the style of this later performance was different from that of Kurbas, despite the fact that Hakkebush and Vasyl'ko transferred to this production many mise-en-scenes from Kurbas' production score.

The second Shakespearian production in the Ukrainian language was the *Taming of the Shrew* at the state Shevchenko Theatre in Kiev (October 13, 1922). The director, Oleksii Smyrnov created a merry performance, but in pursuit of gaiety missed the truth of life, sacrificing realism in the name of grotesque. The text of the comedy was torn apart by numerous additional episodes performed by "the servants of the stage", who brought in and took out properties supporting their acting by circus tricks (like *fazzi* in the *commedia dell' arte*).

The third Shakespearian production, *Othello*, was realized at the Lviv Besida Theatre (June 14, 1923), where its director Alexander Zaharov (the disciple of Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko) was triumphant also as actor in the portrayal of the main character. In his portrayal of an African of unstable temperament the critics saw tenderness and brutality, love and hate, slyness and helplessness, egoism and self-sacrifice. At the moment of greatest suffering and torment, Zaharov portrayed his hero as mad and furious. The whole cast received excellent reviews, with the exception of Marian Krushelnyskyi as Roderigo who, in the opinion of the critics, "unpleasantly surprised the audience with his character of a hurt, slightly foolish boy, dressed in the pink coat of a guiltless page, whose lips pouted from vexation and whose eyes winked in astonishment"...⁴

The second production of *Othello* took place at the Zańkovetska Theatre in Dnipropetrovsk (February 6, 1926) under the artistic direction of the Ukrainian actor Panas Saksahanskyi, the leading figure of the traditional ethnographic theatre. He himself prepared a new translation of the play. During the preparation of the production, Saksahanskyi stressed repeatedly that Othello should not be portrayed only as a jealous man, but as a man deeply in love. On the basis of this feeling, Iago spins his villainous web of intrigue until he succeeds in stirring in Othello the spirit of mistrust which becomes inflamed to madness. Thus Saksahanskyi tried to interpret the play not as a tragedy of jealousy, but as one of trust. The essence of his work with the actors was his creative principle: "Acting which is not warmed with the sincerity of feeling will be cold, and could become routine; could give birth to falsity, which in turn is the death of the creation"...

Othello remained in the repertoire of the Zańkovetska Theatre for several seasons and entered into its 'golden fund'. This production was twice revived by the Zańkovetska Theatre (in 1832 by Ivan Chabanenko and in 1936 by Vasyli' Kharchenko). In 1940 the Zańkovetska Theatre celebrated a memorable anniversary — the 150-th performance of *Othello*.

A Midsummer Night's Dream was the first production of a Shakespeare play in the Franko Theatre of Kiev (premiere October 16, 1927) and, in the words of the producer, "was staged on the plane of theatrical realism".⁶ That remark by Hnat Lura has to be understood in qualification: the festivity, splendour and merriment were strengthened by Mendelssohn's music and by additional music by Nathan Pruslin (permanent musical director of the Franko Theatre), who composed in the same style. The author of these lines saw this performance and was convinced that although the production was truly festive and merry, realism was the dominating element. Particularly realistic were the group of artisans and the two pairs of lovers (Hermia-Lysander, Helena-Demetrius). Those of the world of fantasy (Oberon, Titania) were less clearly outlined. Therefore the conflict between light and darkness was weakened. The constructive design of the stage proved to be unsuitable for this type of performance because the severe outlines of geometrical figures and squares destroyed the feeling of the fairy mystical forest. The attempt to use many lighting effects did not improve matters. Critics, however, received the production very favourably: ... "The performance was a wonderful surprise. Sound, words, colours, lighting, music, Shakespearian wit, all was a real feast, a true solemn occasion for the theatre" ...⁷

During the next 14 years Shakespeare was represented by the following productions: *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (Kharkiv Theatre of Revolution, 1933; Odessa Revolution Theatre, 1941; and the Artemivsk Drama Theatre, 1941); *Othello* (Odessa Revolution Theatre, 1936 and Kharkiv Komsomol Theatre, 1933); *Romeo and Juliet* (Dnipropetrovsk Drama Theatre, 1933 and Kharkiv Theatre for Young Spectators, 1941); *Much Ado About Nothing* (Odessa Revolution Theatre and Kiev Franko Theatre — both in 1941); *Twelfth Night* (Poltava Gogol Theatre, 1940) ... Their significance is not great. Exactly at that time, an intensive campaign began to propagate "socialist realism", the only permitted style in all arts. In the drama (including translated works) it was characterized by the exact following of texts and by an exaggeration of social aspects of life.

In contrast to this tendency, finally, on September 21, 1943 (during the German occupation) the drama section of the Lviv Opera Theatre (LOT)

produced *Hamlet*. It was the first production of this Shakespearian tragedy on the Ukrainian stage. Although various translations of *Hamlet* had been made in Ukrainian, LOT focussed its attention on the newest translation by Mykhailo Rudnytsky. Its significance and value existed in the clarity of its text, which was easily understood by actors and the audience alike and was a masterly achievement by the translator, despite the difficulty of conveying many English idioms and puns. The tragedy was produced by Iosyp Hirniak, the former leading member of Berezhil'. The stage design was projected by Myroslav Hryhoriev. The musical arrangements consisted mainly of earlier compositions written by Mykola Lysenko and completed by Lev Turkevych. In the main roles appeared: Volodymyr Blavatskyi — Hamlet; Bohdan Pazdrii — Claudius; Vira Levyt'ska — Gertrude; Ivan Hirniak — Polonius; Liza Shashariv'ska — Ophelia; and Serhii Dubrov'skyi — Laertes.

Hirniak recalled that the great work on *Hamlet* "did not begin smoothly and without troubles, especially in the early moments despair came often; moments when we wanted to quit a seemingly impossible task. However, these attacks of apathy were overcome and we continued with even greater energy and enthusiasm. Personally, it was difficult for me to overcome the complexities of Hamlet's role. Even the memorizing of the text, a purely mechanical process, required a long time. The responsibilities of being artistic director of LOT, the production of operas and operettas, acting in dramatical performances, lecturing in the drama school, consumed all my time from early morning till late at night. Only after midnight was I able to concentrate on Hamlet's role. Many times, the early morning found me still sitting over my notes on *Hamlet*" ...⁸

The premiere was highly successful and was received with great enthusiasm by the selected audience. The best evidence of this is that the next 25 performances were sold out. Some spectators witnessed as many as 10 performances, and many foreigners attended without understanding even a word of Ukrainian. The production was reviewed favourably by both Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian critics. Ivan Nimchuk, for instance, wrote in *Nashi dni*: "The production of *Hamlet* by I. Hirniak is in the realistic style, though it bears a noticeable colouring of romanticism. Our producer tried to stress the will and action of Hamlet so that a spectator would see him as strong, full of ideas, passions and individuality, and who in the end falls only because circumstances proved to be stronger than he. For the success of the performance, for the interpretation of the very difficult parts by actors of LOT who were not experienced in classical works of such complexity, yet who created very interesting types, for this wonderful display we have, first of all, to be grateful to the talented and experienced producer" ...⁹

As for Blavatskyi's interpretation of the first Ukrainian Hamlet, it is the opinion of the present author, that he created a thinker-philosopher rather than a youth who shudders from the horrible disclosures of life, from repugnant reality. Blavatskyi's Hamlet was not governed by profound emotions, but by an intellect noticeable in the sharpness of his remarks, which were full of strength and confidence. He was more impressive in the scenes with Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the actors, Claudius, the grave-diggers, and Osric, and less impressive in his meetings with the Ghost, or with Gertrude or Ophelia. It was a great pleasure to follow his interpretation of the text, and to listen to the richness of his intonations. His portrayal of Hamlet was truly a remarkable creation, and was recognized as such by many critics, including the previously mentioned I. Nimchuk.

The rest of the leading actors were successful in their efforts to portray the Shakespearian characters truthfully, although, as Claudius, Pazdrii could have been a more dignified king; as Gertrude, Levytska might have been a less lyrical, and a little more dramatic, queen; as Polonius, Ivan Hirniak could have been a more creeping toady; as Ophelia, Shasharivska slightly overplayed the role (with the exception of the scene of madness); and as Laertes, Dubrovskyi could have been more colourful vocally. Among the episodic roles, the strongest impression was given by the First Player, Yaroslav Helias, who 13 years later was to successfully act the part of Hamlet at the Shevchenko Drama Theatre in Kharkiv (formerly Berezil').

The review of the first stagings of Shakespearian plays in Ukrainian of any significance could end with LOT's production of *Hamlet*. The return of the Soviet regime to Ukraine after 1945 meant the return of socialist realism. The number of Shakespearian productions did not diminish; on the contrary, the list became even longer. It included the following new productions: *King Lear*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Life and Death of King Richard III* and others ... But the quality was clearly lowered. All of these performances were marked by the absence of experimental readings of the text, naturalism and melodramatism. If the first production of *Macbeth* of 1920 (Kiidramte and Berezil') reflected the contemporary events of the time, the newest production of *Macbeth* of 1977 (Kiev Franko Theatre), according to critics, does not bear such revelations. Shakespearian productions in Ukraine today have become only an illustration of respect for the heritage of the greatest world playwright.

Vancouver, 1978.

Footnotes

1. *Les' Kurbas (Spohady suchasnykiv), (Kyiv [Kiev]): Mystetstvo, 1969), p. 113.*
2. *Chervovyi shliakh*, No. 4-5 (1924), p. 282.
3. I. H. Vanina, *Shekspir na ukraïnskii stseni* (Kyïv: Derzhavne vydavnytstvo, 1958), p. 51.
4. M. Kedryn, in *Dilo*, June 16, 1923.
5. *P. K. Saksahanskyi* (Kyïv: Mystetstvo, 1939), p. 41.
6. I. H. Vanina, *Ukraiïnska shekspiriana* (Kyïv: Mystetstvo, 1964), p. 88.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
8. V. Blavatskyi, "Prapremiera *Hamleta*," *Teatr*, no. 2 (June-July, 1946), p. 28. Published in Munich.
9. *Nashi dni*, (October, 1943), p. 8. Published in Lviv.