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Les Kurbas's Use of Film Language in his Stage Productions of *Jimmie Higgins* and *Macbeth*

On June 23, 1923 the citizens of Kiev read in the *Bilshovyk* newspaper a review which compared the three shows the theatre director Les Kurbas had staged that season in Kiev with the three productions just presented by the Meyerhold Theatre on its first tour of Kiev. The conclusion of the article was concise and blunt: "No wonder all of Kiev is saying that Kurbas has triumphed over Meyerhold."[1]

Fifteen months earlier Les Kurbas started training a group of young actors. They called themselves the First Studio of the Berezil Artistic Association and set out to create a new world on the Ukrainian stage. In the next ten years the Berezil became one of the best theatres in Europe, while Les Kurbas, Berezil's artistic leader, became an innovative modern director. During the 1920s, Kurbas developed a sensibility towards stage space and time which looks surprisingly contemporary to today's eye.

In Kurbas we have a striking example of how a major theatre artist embraced concepts of the developing language of film which led him to create a new sensibility of time and space on stage. Film prodded Kurbas to create multiple spaces of representation on stage and to inter-cut time. These experiments acted as a catalyst pushing Kurbas to move beyond mere intercutting to include simultaneous presentations of timepresent and timepast in a single multi-faceted space. In this article we will look at two productions from the 1923–24 season: *Jimmie Higgins*, a new revolutionary play, and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

In the earliest days of the Berezil, the actor training program Kurbas developed concentrated primarily on rhythmic movement set to music. Kurbas believed in "the importance of the rhythmic composition of stage action for the transmission of the inner, moral idea of depicted events, the inner dy-

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1. Mykola Bazhan [Panfuturyst-ekstruktor], "Les Kurbas i Vsevolod Meierkhold" [Les Kurbas and Vsevolod Meyerhold], *Bilshovyk* (Kiev), 23 June 1923, p. 3.

namic of human passions and experiences."[2] He defined acting as "duration in an assigned plane and rhythm"[3] and felt that an actor's talent depended on his ability to sense the nuances in the world of rhythm, recognize the particular complexity of the desired rhythm and be able to enter into it. Kurbas's initial productions with the First Studio had used the external manifestations of the assigned rhythm. But soon he wanted to examine the currents underneath these external rhythms.

In order to explore what could stir human depths,[4] Kurbas turned to one of the great texts of world drama, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. He was not interested in an academic production which would attempt to recreate the optical illusion of the past on stage. Nor would Kurbas try to "restore Shakespeare in the style of his time which [he felt was] formally impossible and in its essence unnecessary."[5] According to a notice which appeared in the *Bilshovyk* newspaper in Kiev, Kurbas believed that:

> The total value of a stage incarnation of a classical text in our time lies precisely in its ability to present the text as it is fractured in the prism of the contemporary worldview.[6]

We can say that the prism through which Kurbas was viewing life in the 1923–24 season turned out, to a large extent, to be a film camera lens.[7]

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2. A.V. Zaporozhets, "Master: Vospominanie o Lese Kurbase" [Master: Recollections about Les Kurbas] in *Izbrannye psikhologicheskie trudy v dvukh tomakh* [Collected psychological works in two volumes], ed. V.V. Davydova and V.P. Zinchenko (Moscow, 1986), I:30.*

3. Iosyp Hirniak, *Spomyny* [Memoirs], edited by Bohdan Boichuk, (New York, 1982), p. 161.

4. Matvii Shatulsky [Proletkor], "Mystetske obiednannia 'Berezil' na Ukraini" [The Artistic Association Berezil in Ukraine], *Holos pratsi* (Winnipeg), no. 12 (December 1923), p. 22.

5. "Do postanovky 'Makbeta' v 4 maisterni M.O.B." [About the production of *Macbeth* in the 4th studio of M.O.B.], *Bilshovyk* (Kiev), 1 April 1924. A similar point is made in: S. Bondarchuk, "K postanovke 'Makbeta' 4–i masterskoi M.O.B. Lesem Kurbasom" [About the production of *Macbeth* with the 4th studio of M.O.B. by Les Kurbas]. *Prolestarskaia pravda* (Kiev), 2 April 1924, p. 5.* Both articles seem to be paraphrasing Kurbas's views on the production.

6. "Do postanovky. . . ." This article also mentions that this was Kurbas's fourth version of *Macbeth*. He had previously staged the play with the State Dramatic Theatre in Kiev in 1919. Kurbas's second and third versions were done in 1920 with the Kyidramte, first in Bila Tserkva, then in Uman.

7. Bor. Sim., "Do hastroliv maisterni 'Berezil' (Rozmova z hol. rezhiserom i

In the summer of 1923, several weeks after the review comparing Kurbas's and Meyerhold's work appeared in the *Bilshovyk*, Matvii Shatulsky, a Canadian journalist, visited the Berezil and interviewed Kurbas. Shatulsky was impressed with how much Kurbas seemed to know about American theatre, but was somewhat taken aback to hear that Kurbas was actually more interested in discussing the work of an American film director. The director Kurbas spoke about enthusiastically that day was D.W. Griffith, especially his film *Intolerance*.[8]

Next day Shatulsky toured the Berezil with Kurbas who outlined the work of the various studios. Shatulsky reported that at the time there were close to 300 members in four studios and the organization had so many research committees and conducted such a variety of lessons that it appeared to be a veritable theatrical university. Enthralled, Shatulsky also described how Kurbas conducted an early rehearsal of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Shatulsky never imagined that his own visit would result in the postponement of the Shakespearean production he had found so fascinating. During his visit Shatulsky had given Kurbas a copy of a popular American novel, Upton Sinclair's *Jimmie Higgins*.[9] Kurbas was immediately impressed by its dramatic possibilities. He interrupted the rehearsals of *Macbeth*,[10] dramatized *Jimmie Higgins* and staged it with the Fourth Studio that fall.

Kurbas's *Jimmie Higgins* was a verse play with a cinematic structure which narrated the story of a simple American worker, a Socialist, whose family is killed in a munitions plant explosion. Afterwards Jimmie is sent to fight the Hun in Europe and then the Soviets in Arkhangelsk. There he is arrested by his own Secret Service for contact with Bolsheviks and goes insane under torture.[11]

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orhanizatorom maisterni L. Kurbasom)" [About the tour of the Studio Berezil (An interview with the artistic director and organizer of the studio L. Kurbas)], *Visty VUTsVK* (Kharkiv), 18 May 1924, p. 3.

8. Shatulsky, p. 19.

9. Les Taniuk, "Les Kurbas i svitova kultura" [Les Kurbas and world culture], *Vsesvit* (Kiev), no. 6 (June 1987), p. 150.

10. The first reading of *Macbeth* at the Berezil was held on July 24, 1923, but the show opened only nine months later on April 2, 1924. (N.B. Kuziakina, "'Makbet' Shekspira v postanovkakh Lesia Kurbasa" [Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in Les Kurbas's productions] in *P'esa i spektakl': sbornik statei*, pp. 50–66, edited by A.Z. Iufit, (Leningrad, 1978), p. 55.*)

11. Les Kurbas, *Dzhimmi Higginz* [Jimmie Higgins], a play based on the novel of Upton Sinclair (Kharkiv, 1924). All major movements in the production are described in this script. Music, light and sound effect cues are given, and even the

In the production Kurbas introduced the use of film on stage as an integral part of the narrative, at moments creating a powerful confluence of film and stage action. He also used the conceptual base of several film techniques to create a new approach to the theatrical space and explore a new level of reality on stage.

D.W. Griffith is generally acknowledged to be "the seminal genius of the narrative cinema and its first great visionary artist."[12] Griffith was the first to use close-ups and to inter-cut shots from various angles and distances in a single scene in order to propel his narrative. He destroyed the idea that the film frame was a proscenium arch and that the actors should be shown only in full shots so that their heads just cleared the top and their feet touched the bottom of this frame, which had been the convention till then.[13] Griffith also realized the power of associative editing, which, for example, could be used to create a sense of memory. " 'You can photograph thought,' " he was once quoted as saying.[14]

Kurbas seized on the idea that film could portray characters' thoughts on stage. In *Jimmie Higgins* he introduced this idea very simply at first, teaching the audience the language he was developing. When a character entered with news of a political event, a film of the event was shown as he related the story. Soon film was used to complete a character's thought and then images were juxtaposed to events on stage, moving towards ever more complex patterns. The scene of the explosion which ended the second act was the most powerful montage of film and stage action in *Jimmie Higgins*.

Griffith was the first to develop the use of montage in film for narrative purposes.[15] For example, he would tell the story of a rescue scene by cutting between shots of the different parties involved. He would also use montage to formally build the climax of the film. By using ever shorter shots, Griffith would transform the dramatic climax of a film into a visual crescendo.[16]

Similarly, in the explosion scene in *Jimmie Higgins*, Kurbas inter-cut between stage and film to create the narrative. The sequence began with

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lengths of the pauses are noted.

12. David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, (New York, 1981), p. 59.

13. Ibid, pp. 63–64.

14. Ibid, p. 87.

15. Edwin S. Porter actually first used a rudimentary form of inter-cutting, but Griffith developed the idea. (Cook, p. 66.) The Soviet film director, Lev Kuleshov, first developed the ideas of montage theoretically based on his study of Griffith's films. (See Cook p. 138–140.)

16. Cook p. 66.

a film clip of an explosion. On stage the group of workers wonders what exploded, while the film shows a working class neighborhood and Jimmie's wife and children playing. Jimmie shouts and runs off stage. On film we see Jimmie running through the same neighborhood and then we see a huge crater. The film cuts to a close-up of Jimmie's face in despair, shattering the audience's sense of proportion and image on stage.

By condensing time like Griffith, Kurbas managed to transform the dramatic climax into a visual crescendo. The explosion scene both narrates the events of the explosion and becomes an explosive portrait of the moment, a jumble of exterior and interior events, fused with fragments of memories and feelings.[17]

Griffith's montages not only condensed time but also juxtaposed spaces. The visual crescendo Griffith built for his audience during a rescue scene, for instance, was composed of a variety of actions in a variety of spaces. But during the screening of a film all these spaces were seen by the audience on a single plane—the film projection surface. By placing the film projection on a stage and juxtaposing its images to other actions on stage Kurbas was able to incorporate the variety of planes and spaces created by the stage set into his montage. The projection surface became part of a larger montage of performance spaces Kurbas was creating in the production.

Kurbas's incorporation of the theatrical space of the auditorium into his montage also implied that the present moment, the time in which the live actors were performing and the actual moment the audience was experiencing the performance could also be inter-cut into the montage. The montage Kurbas created in the explosion scene, therefore, caused an esthetic explosion of image, time and space, for the audience, which also included the time and space they shared with the actors. The impact of this explosion was all the more powerful because it was all the more present.

For the torture scenes in the final act of *Jimmie Higgins* Kurbas used the ideas of several film techniques that he had employed in the explosion scene, but staged the scenes without actually using any film.

Griffith, as mentioned, believed film could recreate the sensation of the human mind by employing close-ups and flashbacks. Today, we have assimilated the language of film to such a degree that it is hard for us to see the impact these techniques originally had on the general perception of

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17. For a detailed discussion of the use of time in explosion scene and the torture scenes see: Virlana Tkacz, "Time and Transformation in Les Kurbas's Production of *Jimmie Higgins*," paper presented at the ATHE Conference in Chicago, Illinois, 7 August, 1987.

the continuity of time and space. The work of Hugo Munsterberg, a pioneer of film theory, can help us understand how profound was this impact. In a 1916 study Munsterberg notes that the close-up and the flashback disturb our usual perception of reality. These film devices, he writes, create the sensations that:

> reality has lost its own continuous connection and becomes shaped by the demands of our soul. It is as if the outer world itself became molded in accordance with our fleeting turns of attention or with our passing memory.[18]

In the explosion scene Kurbas had used a film close-up of Jimmie's face in despair to create a subjective focus on Jimmie's emotional state. In Munsterberg's terminology the close-up was used to disturb the usual sense of proportion to reflect on film the attention the soul gave to this fleeting, but overwhelming moment. In the torture scenes Kurbas made use of the cinematic concept of the close-up to mold the outer world of the stage to reflect the sensations in Jimmie's mind, and he did this by using purely theatrical terms.

In the two scenes of torture Jimmie and the interrogator were on a large platform stage left approximately ten feet above the stage floor. Kurbas decided not to illustrate the torture realistically but to expand that moment in Jimmie's consciousness which permitted him to withstand the pressure, and to present this on stage. He used a collective of actors to portray Jimmie's thoughts. As Jimmie started to faint from the torture, the actor playing Jimmie grabbed a rope and swung down from the tall platform to the stage level. There Jimmie was surrounded by actors who had previously played his friends or family members. They repeated snippets of lines from previous scenes, and even argued as to whether or not Jimmie should give into the interrogation. As Jimmie found a voice which strongly urged defiance, he swung back up to the interrogation platform and fell to the ground faint.

As the actor playing Jimmie, grabbed the rope and swung down from the platform to the stage he was transferring the action from one playing area to another as in a film jump cut. The area he was jumping into was a close-up of his own mind. Although the scale of the actor did not change, the audience's perception of the scale of the space the actor was entering shifted. The actor playing Jimmie descended from the platform where he and the other actors played human beings in a room, to the stage floor where he and the other actors played thoughts in his own fainting consciousness.

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18. Hugo Munsterberg, *The Photoplay; A Psychological Study* (New York, 1916; reprint ed., New York, 1970), p. 95.

The audience was looking at the events on stage as if through a microscope into a human soul.

Where previously, in the explosion scene the mind was confined to the film screen, in the final act as Jimmie was loosing grip on reality under torture, most of the stage area was taken up by a portrayal of his mind. The actors were no longer occupying a human-sized space, but were playing his memories, presented as a montage of flashbacks from previous scenes which fused with possible solutions for Jimmie's present dilemma. The audience was witnessing a close-up of the inner working of a mind on the verge of a breakdown.

By incorporating the new relationships to time and space developed by the cinema, the theatre could transcend the limitations of its own basic material, the physical reality of the human body. In his production of *Jimmie Higgins* Kurbas showed that this transcendence could be achieved without distorting or hiding the basic human shape. The invisible could become visible without obscuring that which has always been seen. From this threshold the horizons looked limitless. Dmytro Vlasiuk, a young designer at the Berezil noted, that at this point Kurbas's co-worker's began to realize that: the theatre "could transmit not only outer events, but also the life of the human spirit, the deep inner emotional experiences of the individual human being."[19]

The production of *Jimmie Higgins* opened on 20 November 1923 and proved to be one of the most critically acclaimed and popular shows at the Berezil.[20] After the opening Kurbas returned to his work on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

As mentioned previously, Shatulsky saw an early rehearsal of *Macbeth* during the summer of 1923 and he described it in detail:

> Leaning on the window-sill with a copy of the play in his hand and the perpetual cigarette in his mouth, Kurbas read the play with the proper intonations. He read very slowly, gently keeping time with his right hand. And the actors performed the roles . . . without words. They rehearsed the entrances, gestures, assumed appropriate poses, facial expressions, but did not say a single word. Kurbas spoke for them. From time to time he gently corrected someone or another. Problems were reviewed

19. Dmytro Vlasiuk, "Storinka mynuloho" [A page from the past], in *Les Kurbas; spohady suchasnykiv* [Les Kurbas; recollections of contemporaries], ed. Vasyl Vasylko (Kiev, 1969), p. 227.

20. For a summary of reviews see: "V khudozhestvennom obiedynanye 'Berezil' " [At the Berezil Artistic Association], *Proletarskaia pravda* (Kiev), 19 November 1924, p. 6.

several times. He paid attention to the smallest details. The actor's every movement was performed in time to Kurbas's "prompting." But even if you didn't hear Kurbas's words, you could tell what was going on through the performer's movements, gestures and facial expressions. The performer was narrating his part, his experiences without words.[21]

In this rehearsal experiment Kurbas was forcing a discontinuity between the vocal and the visual devices available to the actors, forcing them to concentrate on the expressive powers of the visual. Kurbas was training the actors to narrate the story visually with their gestures. They were learning to work like actors in silent films.

Kurbas did not retain the experiment in the total discontinuity between movement and voice for the performances of *Macbeth*, although elements remained in the scenes to create some of the most powerful images in the production.[22] Here, however, we will focus on the other forms of disruption and discontinuity in this production which were perhaps also suggested by cinematic devices.

Most early silent movies had very thin texts. It was in comparison to these that Griffith's outstanding use of parallel action had earned him the name "the Shakespeare of the screen."[23] In his most ambitious project, *Intolerance*, which, as we mentioned Kurbas greatly admired, the cross-cutting was complex because the film interwove four stories on the theme of intolerance. The aspect of this film today recognized as "revolutionary" was Griffith's use of cross-cutting between parallel actions occurring in separate temporal planes. As Cook notes:

for the better part of the film's last two reels Griffith involves us in three separate three-way rescues [taking place in three different eras] and a dramatically excoriating

21. Shatulsky, p. 21.

22. Kurbas described his use of visual images for narrative purpose using a monolog from *Macbeth* as an example: "Macbeth delivers a monolog in which he talks of one thing, but what is the actual process of his unconscious is another matter. This is revealed by the movement of the figure around the crown. The attention of the spectator is split into two processes. The spectator pays attention to what Macbeth is saying, and to what he is doing and this provokes a sharpening of the spectator's perception." (Les Kurbas, "Pro peretvorennia iak odyn iz obraznykh zasobiv rozkryttia hlybokoi suti zhyttia" [On transformation as one of the imagistic devices revealing the deep essence of life] in Les Kurbas, *Berezil: Iz tvorchoi spadshchyny* [Berezil: From the creative heritage], edited by M. Labinsky, with a foreword by Iurii Boboshko, (Kiev, 1988), p. 128.)

23. Cook, p. 59.

Crucifixion. . . . [He uses] shots of shorter and shorter duration to create what is even today among the most exciting and unusual climactic sequences in motion picture history.[24]

Perhaps it was with the hopes of creating a theatrical equivalent for Griffith's complex inter-cutting of parallel actions in separate temporal planes that Kurbas approached the rehearsals of the Shakespearean text with experiments suggested by silent film techniques.

Before Kurbas could start inter-cutting parallel actions in separate temporal planes in his production of *Macbeth*, he had to establish a second temporal plane which would have actions that were parallel to the story in Shakespeare's text. The exact nature of this second time had to be clearly established for the shifts in time to have any impact or meaning. Griffith's film had spent over three hours developing the four stories and establishing a clear form of transition between them before adapting the startling pace of time shifts in the final reels.[25] In his production of *Macbeth* Kurbas hoped to establish another time without using any film and without making any major changes in Shakespeare's text.

Kurbas approached Shakespeare's text of *Macbeth* as an interpreter, not a reviser. He, of course, made some cuts, but these did not exceed common practice of the time.[26] He also created several pantomimed scenes which he hoped would help transmit the essence of his interpretation. We will examine several of the pantomimes, but will concentrate primarily on

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24. Cook, p. 95. Although Griffith's *Intolerance* is now considered a classic it was not a commercial success in its time. Its sheer length probably contributed to its failure at the box office. As Cook says: "For the audiences of 1916 . . . *Intolerance* was simply too much—too big, too complicated, too serious and too solemn." (Cook, p. 98).

25. At first Griffith placed great emphasis on his moment of transition, "the cradle endlessly rocking," but towards the end of the film he dropped it and cut directly between the four stories. (Cook, p. 95).

26. At the time extensive rewrites of all play texts by directors was considered standard practice at the Berezil. Kurbas's relation to Shakespeare's text was the exception. The notice in the *Bilshovyk* was specific on this point and is worth quoting: "The play text has not been revised by Kurbas. [The changes he] permitted [himself] were only cuts which are normal practice even in ordinary academic theatres. Since in the given work Shakespeare [shows himself] a master of the stage, Kurbas thinks that our relationship to the work should not be that of revision, for which there is no reason, but of *interpretation by the director* [bold in the original]." "Do postanovky . . ."

the various disruptions and discontinuities in this production that were the result of Kurbas's attempt to introduce another time into his production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

Perhaps Kurbas was following the pattern set by Griffith in his *Intolerance*, when he focused attention on the moments of transition in his production of *Macbeth*. Kurbas disrupted the continuous flow of action from scene to scene in the play by stressing the different nature of the transitional moments between scenes. During these transitional moments the actors entered the stage as performers and then in front of the audience transformed into the characters of the play. Vasyl Vasylko, Kurbas's long-time assistant wrote that "only after greeting those present in the auditorium, did [the actors] enter into the image."[27] After they finished their scene the actors disengaged from the character as they were leaving the stage. Vasylko noted that "the first scene with the witches was played 'with heightened theatricality' . . . when the scene finished and 'the actresses-witches headed towards the exit, they did so at an ordinary pace (the ordinary walk of actresses, not of witches.)"[28] By disrupting the narration of Shakespeare's tale of timepast with a moment from timepresent Kurbas was introducing a second time into his production of *Macbeth*. This disruption was accomplished by a single action, an exit, during which a change in the rhythm of the actress' walk and the transformation of the figures on stage from characters into performers, created a shift in time.

The production design emphasized this shift in time during the moments of transition. Vadym Meller had stripped the theatre bare of all curtains, masking and drops and had painted the stage floor black.[29] He designed a series of very large screens made of stretched canvas. They were pale green with giant modernist block letters, in red, which announced the place of action: "Macbeth's Castle," "Precipice,"[30] "The Castle Gates."[31] The

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27. Vasyl Vasylko, "Rezhyser-novator" [Director-innovator], *Vitchyzna* (Kiev), no. 12 (December 1963), p. 173).

28. V. Vasylko, Diaries, GMTMK No. 10374 quoted in Kuziakina, " 'Makbet'. . . ," p. 58.

29. Vadym Meller, the designer, at first planned a complex construction, but, according to Kuziakina, the actual performance design had to be simplified because of budget problems. (Kuziakina, " 'Makbet'. . . ," p. 56.) Brilliant design often results from elegant solutions to real problems.

30. "Precipice" [*provallia*] is apparently how Pantelemon Kulish translated Shakespeare's "Heath." See picture in Hirniak, p. 196.

31. For certain scenes a green platform which had ropes on four corners going

set changed during the transitional moments. A gong rang out as the new screen with the appropriate sign was lowered and the old one was raised.[32] Since the changes were done in full view of the audience, the set, just like the performers, was moving from engagement to disengagement.[33] Lights were also used to stress the moments of transition. During the scene with the witches, for instance, the stage was lit with a "surreal violet lighting" and the witches had "mysterious little lights twinkling in the folds of their clothes. But as soon as this scene concluded . . . the calm light of day flooded the stage."[34] This major shift in the quality of light stressed the shift in time during this moment of transition.

The emphasized presentation of the moments of transition on stage can be seen as an attempt to create the theatrical equivalent of cross-cutting of parallel action between two temporal planes. We can say that the actresses were creating a jump cut from timepast into timepresent during a single action, an exit, by changing the rhythm of their walk and also obviously disengaging from their characters. The set and light changes helped emphasize the abruptness of the shift in time, its film cut-like quality. The repetition of the cut-shifts in time throughout the show had the effect of inter-cutting the present into Shakespeare's historical tale of a regicide and its resulting upheavals.

The shifts in time in this production were not, however, confined merely to the transitional moments. By showing the audience the actor undergoing the transition from performer into the character, Kurbas was simply momentarily stressing the constant dual nature of the figure on stage that was at

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up to the grid was also lowered, as were some benches and a table. (Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre, 1905–1932*, translated by Roxane Permar, edited by Lesley Milne, (New York, 1988), p. 110.)

Several scholars have remarked that these giant screens were probably derived from "locality boards" believed to have been used in Shakespeare's time. (See for example Rudnitsky, p. 110 or Iurii Boboshko, *Rezhysser Les Kurbas*, [Director Les Kurbas] (Kiev, 1987), p. 85.) But the overwhelming size of the screens seems to suggests that they could also be related to silent movie titles.

32. Kuziakina, " 'Makbet'. . . ," p. 50.

33. Changing sets in full view of the audience was not in itself an innovation. For instance, this was standard practice in England during the Restoration and was considered to be part of the show.(Catherine Itzin, "Macbeth in the Restoration," *Theatre Quaerterly* 1 (July-September 1971), p. 18.) But Kurbas's use of the set changes to introduce another time into the production was an innovative use of this device.

34. Rudnitsky, p. 110.

once both the contemporary performer and character in a tale of timepast.

Certain elements in the design, such as the costumes, helped the audience remain constantly aware of the dual nature of the performers. The base of most of the costumes was made of contemporary military or work clothes. On top were layered Medieval-type tunics, gowns and cloaks. These, in turn, had very modern geometric borders sewn on them. The top layer of the costumes suggested the timepast of the play and established the figure on stage as a character in this time. The base and the border design elements of the costumes emphasized the present time and established the figure on stage as a person who was the audience's contemporary. The fact that both layers could be seen together constantly reminded the audience that the performers were contemporary people who were playing historical roles for the audience's benefit.[35]

We can say that the constant juxtaposition of the two aspects of the figure on stage by the costumes was continually inter-cutting timepresent into timepast. This constant inter-cutting empowered both times. Any action on stage was actually being performed by a figure that was both part of timepast and timepresent and, therefore, this action could be seen as happening in either time or in both together. The choice was up to the individual audience's reading of time at any given moment. This helped activate the very act of perception throughout the show.[36]

The schematic nature of the set functioned like the layering of the costumes. The information on the signs was absolutely clear. But, as a theatrical device determining location, each sign permitted no certainty as to spatial location at any given moment. Each sign urged the audience to imagine a location, while its very nature, the fact that it was a sign, stressed the theatrical aspect of the space. The set, therefore, permitted timepast and timepresent, and their respective spaces, to be constantly juxtaposed on stage, actually to co-exist in the same space of representation. The very form of the set also activated both the audience's imagination and its process of perception.

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35. See pictures in Rudnitsky, p. 164–5 or Hirniak, p. 196.

36. Even Vanina, one of the few Soviet scholars allowed to comment on this production in the early 1960s, noticed that the contemporary layer of clothing reduced the distance between the actors and the audience. She aptly, but seemingly totally unconsiously, remarks: "Banquo's assasins appeared in ordinary heavy work clothes and only their short black cloaks differentiated them from the spectators in the auditorium."(I. Vanina, *Ukrainska shekspiriana; do istorii vtilennia pies Shekspira na ukrainskyi stseni* [Ukrainian Shakespeariana; towards a history of production of Shakespeare plays on the Ukrainian stage], (Kiev, 1964), pp. 86–87.)

Since the figure on stage had the dual aspect of constantly being both a character in timepast and a contemporary of the audience, all its actions on stage created resonances in both times. The struggle of Shakespeare's characters for political power carried great immediacy for the inhabitants of Kiev, where the government had changed hands twelve times between 1917 and 1920, usually under very bloody circumstances. At the same time, the audiences was being made aware that the people on stage, who were grappling with questions of murder, conscience and legitimacy of power, were their own contemporaries. These were major issues for Kievans who had survived the recent nightmare of history, but in 1924 contemporary texts were not addressing these topics. In this production Kurbas was using the present to give power to Shakespeare's story of a distant past and in turn was using Shakespeare to illuminate the present situation.[37]

The awareness of the fact that the performers were their contemporaries strengthened the links between the performer and the audience. In certain moments lights were used to emphasize this point. For instance, in their first scene with Macbeth and Banquo, the witches stood far upstage and were lit from the sides and behind, so that they cast enormous shadows into the auditorium. Macbeth and Banquo never saw the witches, but spoke only to the shadows in the audience.[38] By placing the shadows in the audience, Kurbas was blending the actors with the audience, while at the same time he was extending the representational space to include the auditorium.[39]

The character who had the strongest links to the audience was the Porter, a comical character, whose scene had been cut for centuries in the name of unity of style.[40] The Porter, in Kurbas's production was called the Jester

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37. Kurbas believed that a play did not have just one correct concept, but could accomodate as many different ones as directors could create. See: Les Kurbas, "Pytannia analizy piesy iak teatralnoi problemy. Induktsia i deduktsia" [To the question off analyzing a play as a theatrical problem. Induction and deduction] in Kurbas, *Berezil: Iz tvorchoi spadshchny*, p. 93.

38. Kuziakina, " 'Makbet'. . . ," p. 60.

39. So during the moment of transition the lights emphasized the present moment both on stage and in the auditorium, during the scenes the lights encouraged the audience to blend into the scene, feel part of the action, that is, to enter into the past.

40. As Itzin notes: "Neoclassic fastidiousness dictated . . . the loss of the Porter scene (unity of tone would be destroyed by mixing 'comedy' and 'tragedy') . . ." (p. 18). William Charles Macready restored the Porter scene in 1847. (J.C. Trewin "*Macbeth* in the nineteenth Century," *Theatre Quarterly* 1 (July-Septemebr 1971) p. 29.) The scene has ususally been included since Henry Irving restored it in the

and was dressed in the traditional diamond-patched outfit, with a fool's cap and extremely theatrical make-up. Ambrosii Buchma, who played the part, would make direct contact with audience members. At the end of the Porter scene, for instance, he would ask someone in the audience for a light for his cigarette.[41]

The Jester was also given contemporary political jokes, instead of some of his usual lines.[42] Although this seemed like blasphemy to some.[43] Kurbas was actually following Shakespeare's lead.[44] Shakespeare had the Porter come out to answer the pounding on the gate, but then pause to tell several jokes to the audience. Between two bawdy jokes Shakespeare included a very topical political joke about an English Jesuit, who had recently been hanged for attempting to kill the king.[45] Since this joke had been incomprehensible for centuries, especially in translation, a current political joke about Nicholas II[46] seems like an appropriate substitution. The insertion of a contemporary joke about the tsar reinforced the same juxtaposition of timepast to timepresent as Shakespeare himself had created by including a political joke from his own timepresent, the early seventeenth century, into the play's supposed timepast, the eleventh century.

A joke about the recently deposed tsar also reinforced the idea that there

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late 19th century. (Gordon Williams, *Macbeth; Text and Performance*, (London, 1985), p. 30.)

41. Nelli Kornienko "Teatralnaia estetika Lesia Kurbasa" [Les Kurbas's theatre esthetic] in *Les Kurbas: Staty i vospominaniia o L. Kurbase. Literaturnoe nasledie*. [Les Kurbas: Articles and memoirs about L. Kurbas], edited by M. Labinsky, L. Taniuk, foreword by N.B. Kuziakina. (Moscow, 1987), p. 293.*

42. Williams mentions that some Shakespeare scholars feel that the Porter's monolog is set up for comic ad-libbing. He notes that probably this part was originally played by a comedian and a comedian would have been allowed to freshen up his material. (Williams, p. 33–34.)

43. Mykhailo Mohyliansky, " 'Makbet' u Berezoli" [Macbeth at the Berezil]. *Chervonyi shliakh* (Kharkiv), no. 4–5 (April-May 1924), p. 282.

44. Kurbas either knew about the probable ad-libbing by the comedian or sensed this was true. The notice in the *Bilshovyk* is probably paraphrasing Kurbas when it states that: "Only those moments are revised that even in Shakespeare's time were inserted into the text and had something contemporary at their root." ("Do postanavky . . .")

45. Henry Garnet, the superior of the English Jesuits, was accused of being a part of the Gunpowder Plot and was hung in 1606, the year *Macbeth* was presumably written. (Williams, p. 33).

46. Kuziakina, " 'Makbet'. . . ," p. 61.

were parallels between recent events and the plot of the play. In Kurbas's production the mention of tsar Nicholas came right after we had seen the daggers smeared with King Duncan's blood. According to Vanina, Duncan was portrayed as a drunken fool in Kurbas's production and his murder at first seemed like a righteous act.[47] Shakespeare's text allows such a depiction, but it is not a celebration of this act which disrupts the natural rhythm of life. As Jan Kott appropriately noted in his *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, the characters in this play become "death-infected."

> Everyone in this play is steeped in blood; victims as well as murderers. . . . This blood cannot be washed off hands, faces or daggers, *Macbeth* begins and ends with slaughter. There is more and more blood, everyone walks in it; it floods the stage. . . . [Macbeth] dreams of a world without crime, while becoming enmeshed in crime more and more deeply.[48]

Towards the end of the play Macbeth reaches the point where horror seems to have no more impact on him, as he says in Act V scene v:

> . . . I have supped full with horrors.
> Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,
> Cannot once start me.[49]

Although a negative portrayal of the dead tsar was common fare in Soviet theatre in the 1920s, a look at the impact and moral implications the bloodletting during the revolution had on those involved was uncommon. Perhaps this sensitive and difficult topic could only be addressed through a classic which by its nature provided some relief through distance.

Although in Shakespeare's script the Porter has only one scene, Kurbas's Jester appeared in several of the pantomimed scenes Kurbas created for his production of *Macbeth*. The Jester was also given the last laugh in the show. Iryna Steshenko, who played one of the witches in the *Macbeth*, described the pantomimed scene Kurbas created after Shakespeare's last lines in the play:

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47. Vanina, p. 86.

48. Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, translated by Boleslaw Taborski, (New York, 1964; W.W. Norton, 1974), pp. 86, 87, 95. The title of the essay is "Macbeth or Death-Infected."

49. *Macbeth* act V, sc 5, lines 13–15.

The Jester–Buchma appears on stage in a bishop's robes. He is carrying a crown. Buchma–the Bishop crowns Malcolm who is kneeling before him. The new king rises and steps to the side. A new pretender to the throne kills him with a sword, takes his crown, goes up to the Bishop, and kneels. The Bishop–Jester crowns the murderer. The new king rises and there is another pretender to the throne. Again the murder, the Coronation. Then, black out.[50]

This pantomime can also be said to be inspired by Shakespeare's own strategies. In act IV Shakespeare had the witches conjure up for Macbeth a show of eight Kings. The last King in line held a mirror in his hand which included in the line of kings Shakespeare's patron and probable host, King James, who was the ninth Stuart monarch. Shakespeare was using the Stuart myth that James descended from Banquo to flatter his host and to affirm his legitimacy to the throne.[51] Kurbas's final pantomime also raised the question of legitimacy, but seems to have intended the opposite effect. It could be read as questioning the legitimacy of the present and as a prophecy of a future butchery in the name of power.

The form of this last pantomime scene suggests possible cinematic origins. A final moment which turned towards the future and compressed time to such a degree that it became a symbolic metaphor was a favorite Griffith device. At the end of *Intolerance*, for instance, Griffith has the prison dissolve into a field. The final image in Kurbas's production, a line of pretenders to the throne stabbing each other, had a similar form of telescoped time, but produced a more disquieting effect.[52]

In his production of *Macbeth* Kurbas used the moments of transition to disrupt the illusion that the actor is the character, that the theatre space is the place of action, and that the time on stage is only the timepast of the play. He established the contemporary moment as a constant powerful presence on stage. This allowed him to examine in depth the questions of murder, conscience and legitimacy of power raised in the play, and to foreground at moments the contemporary nature of these issues. The classical text allowed Kurbas to raise these issues in a society which was still loath to examine its own recent bloody past. By opening time and space on stage to include the present moment and place Kurbas had opened powerful, but potentially explosive, connections in Shakespeare's text to the present situation.

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50. Iryna Steshenko quoted in Kornienko, p. 294.

51. Williams, pp. 9–10.

52. A recent production of *Macbeth* which points to a renewal of the destructive cycle at the end is Roman Polanski's film version. (Williams, p. 24.)

Kurbas's *Macbeth* opened at the beginning of April 1924. As Vasylko noted in his diary, the ending of the production "burst with such a force in the audience, that two, three days later Kiev [was] still screaming . . ."[53] In an interview Kurbas mentioned that his production of "*Macbeth* divided the public into either enthusiasts or opponents."[54] The response on the questionnaires the Berezil handed out to the audience clearly reflected this polarization.[55] *Macbeth* was a brilliant production that also offended many people.

The press reviews were equally polarized. The critic for *Bilshovyk*, the major Ukrainian-language newspaper in Kiev, praised Kurbas's work.[56] But others were outraged by the "barbaric" treatment of a classic.[57] The reviews of the tour of Kharkiv were also divided. The major critic, I. Turkeltaub, loved Kurbas's pantomimes, declaring one of them "pure genius . . . that should be included in all textbooks on directing." However, he disliked the style of acting in the show and blamed the director.[58] Some conserva-

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53. Vasyl Vasylko, Diary GMTMK No. 10374 quoted in Kuziakina, "Makbet'. . . ," p. 63.

54. Kurbas continued: "Pro *Macbeth* was the entire Kievan left front, against it the neo-classicists, the older citizens and some dedicated enemies of the Berezil." Sim., p. 3.

55. Berezil usually handed out audience questionnaires twice for each production: first at the opening, and then at a performance towards the end of a run. The questionnaires for *Macbeth* were issued on April 2 and November 14, 1924. According to Kuziakina, these questionnaires document a polarization in attitudes towards the Berezil and especially towards the production of *Macbeth*. Some loved the show, others absolutely hated it. Passions ran especially high among the opening night audience. Kuziakina notes that the questionnaires from November show similar divisions in opinion, but these were more calmly expressed. (Kuziakina, "'Makbet'. . . ," p. 64.)

56. Iakiv Savchenko, "Shekspir dybom" [Shakespeare upside down]. Review of Les Kurbas's production of *Macbeth*. *Bilshovyk* (Kiev) 4 April 1924.

57. According to Oleksander Kysil, a theatre historian, "Shakespeare did not survive the operation and the production failed." (Oleksandr Kysil, "Novyi ukrainskyi teatr" [The new Ukrainian theatre], *Zhyttia i revoliutsia* (Kiev), no. 4 (April 1925), p. 42.)

On the other hand, Vasyl Desniak praised the innovations of the production: "the inserted elements tied this old play to the contemporary moment." (Vasyl Desniak, "Berezil" *Hlobus* (Kiev), no. 5 (March 1925), pp. 116–117.)

58. I. Turkeltaub, "Ledi Makbet" *Visty VUTsVK* (Kharkiv), 30 May 1924, p. 4.

tive critics felt that "Shakespeare is not suitable for . . . Constructivism."[59] Others disagreed, and felt that the attempt to make Shakespeare more contemporary "was totally successful,"[60] and pointed out that "there [was] more Shakespeare here than in slavish copies."[61]

Two months after the opening of *Macbeth* an actual camera lens became the prism through which Kurbas viewed his work, as he shot his first film, *Vendetta*. In the next year he would shoot two more films,[62] but after this brief foray into film, Kurbas abandoned the cinema and returned to theatrical work.[63]

By exploring the conceptual basis of film techniques and developing their stage expressions Kurbas was able to shift the perception of time and space on stage. In *Jimmie Higgins* Kurbas inter-cut two parallel and simultaneous realities to create Cubist-like portraits of crisis in the human spirit. In *Macbeth* Kurbas inter-cut two temporal planes, two different times, harnessing Shakespeare's authority to address the most difficult issues of Kurbas's time.

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59. H. Khotkevych quoted in Kuziakina, "Ledi Makbet," p. 193.

60. I. Urazov, "Makbet" [Macbeth] *Kommunist* (Kharkiv), no. 123 quoted in Kuziakina, " 'Makbet'. . . ," p. 65.

61. I. Urazov quoted in Kuziakina, "Ledi Makbet," p. 193. Mohyliansky supported this view writing that: "In this production Les Kurbas showed his true artistic stature." (Mohyliansky, p. 283.)

Today theatre historians present various readings of this production, but most would agree with Nelli Kornienko, that the 1924 production of *Macbeth* was of great imporatance to Kurbas's future work at the Berezil. (Kornienko, p. 296.)

62. The Odessa film critic Stepan Radzinsky, would complete a circle by calling Kurbas "the Griffith of the Ukrainian cinema." (Les Taniuk, a director and scholar from Kiev who studies Kurbas's work, told me about this quote at the Conference of Canadian Slavists at Laval University in June of 1989 where this paper was presented. I eagerly await to see a copy of this review.)

63. Later that year Kurbas filmed *Macdonald* and next year *Red Arsenal*. None of his films have been found. (Kurbas, *Berezil*, p. 490.)