
Book Reviews

Irena R. Makaryk. *Shakespeare in the Undiscovered Bourn. Les' Kurbas, Ukrainian Modernism, and Early Soviet Cultural Politics*. Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2004

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A full history of Shakespeare productions on the Ukrainian stage has not yet been written. When the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth was being celebrated, a rather laconic book by Iryna Vanina "Ukrainian Shakespeareana" (Kyiv: Mystetstvo, 1964) appeared, but basically it was the first swallow which did not make a summer yet. Later several essays and articles on this topic were published in various journals and books. It is quite evident that the time for fundamental and analytical investigations has come. The book written by a Canadian Shakespeare scholar Irena Makaryk is a clear case of such exploration.

The volume is devoted to the early Shakespeare performances of Ukrainian theatrical companies in the 1920–30s. The central figure of this process, as well as of Makaryk's monograph, is a prominent Ukrainian director Les' Kurbas, whose innovative production of *Macbeth* can be considered a starting point of Ukrainian theatrical Shakespeareana.

Irena Makaryk is not the first scholar expressing special interest in Kurbas's ideas and performances. The book under review reflects the author's good knowledge of many works on the history of Ukrainian stage, including memoirs, several special essays and book chapters on Kurbas written by well-known scholars (primarily by the late Natalia B. Kuziakina). But the Canadian author's task was to put the outstanding director's fate and activities into the context of the national theatrical life of 1920–30s, which was rigidly regulated by Soviet cultural politics.

Having described the early Shakespeare performances by Kurbas in Kyiv (*Romeo and Juliet* in 1918–1919 and *Macbeth* in 1919–20), the scholar focused on his production of *Macbeth* in the theatre «Berezil'» in 1924. History of the production is expounded in details and the appropriation of it by Ukrainian audience and theatrical critics is thoroughly set forth. Irena Makaryk paid close attention to all the components of the performance, including sets and costumes, music, choreography and, of course, acting. Most impressive is her analysis of

Lyubov Hakkebush's starring as Lady Macbeth and episodic, but very important in Kurbas's view, character of the Porter played by the great Ukrainian actor Amvrosi Buchma.

The book convinces that the modernist, innovating theatrical ideas of Les' Kurbas were extremely important for the overcoming of some anachronical traditions of Ukrainian *ethnographical* theatre. Quite relevant are comparisons between aesthetics of Kurbas and some of his Western European contemporaries, in particular Gordon Craig (99), who came across a number of similar problems in his work. Performing Shakespeare, the leader of «Berezil'» was working "toward a new type of actor" (62) and that aspect of his activity is also presented in the monograph.

Two more laconic chapters are devoted to the performances of two other directors and companies. One of them was *Othello* directed by Panas Saksahans'ky at the Maria Zankovets'ka Theatre (1926). This production combined the traditions of Ukrainian so-called "coryphaees' theatre" with some features of psychological theatre connected with the influence of Stanislavsky's method. Another one was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Hnat Yura at the Ivan Franko Theatre in Kyiv (1927). Irena Makaryk shows that both of these frankly traditional productions were diametrically opposed to Kurbas's work, but at the same time differed from each other. Saksahans'ky and his actors polemized with «Berezil'» but did it artistically, while Yura's performance was a conformist compromise with the official trend in Soviet theatrical art. Against the background of these performances, the innovative quality of Kurbas's *Macbeth* was even more distinct.

The book ends with the essay "The 'Tractor of the Revolution' and 'Vanya Shakespeare'" (177–204), which does not seem to have much relevance to the history of early Shakespeare productions in the Ukraine. A Soviet Ukrainian playwright, Ivan Mykytenko, is the protagonist of this chapter; for his propagandistic plays he was hailed by *agitprop* critics as "the long-awaited Soviet Shakespeare", or "a Homer of the Revolution" (177–180). Through that short depiction of Ivan Mykytenko's career, the whole tendency in the Ukrainian dramatic theatre movement is represented.

The tragic finale of Kurbas's artistic and physical life is shortly depicted in the last paragraphs. Analysing Kurbas's role in the preparation of the world-famous performance of *King Lear* at the Moscow GOSET (State Jewish Theatre), Irena Makaryk agrees with the late Russian scholar Konstantin Rudnitsky's conviction that "the directorial interpretation of *King Lear* in its fundamental, original outlines was created by the marvellous Ukrainian director Les' Kurbas, one of the boldest theatrical innovators of the 1920s" (197). It is known that Kurbas was arrested by OGPU on the 26th of December, 1933 and the rehearsals were continued by Sergej Radlov, whose name appeared on the playbills; however the basic concept of the production belonged to Kurbas who began

to work with Solomon Mikhoels and his company, but regretfully could not complete the work.

One can understand the reasons for Makaryk's laconicism in describing the end of Kurbas's life: arrest, suffering in the concentration camp, and murder. Her book is written about Early Shakespeare productions in the Ukraine, but still methinks, that most of the Western theatrical scholars know unpardonably little about such extreme fates, as those of Meyerhold and Kurbas. It would be expedient to offer them more information about such real personal tragedies which clearly represent the dramatic character of the whole epoch in the history of Soviet art and society.

Putting together the names of Meyerhold and Kurbas in some chapters of her book, the author tries to emphasize each time that Les' Kurbas was not influenced by Meyerhold's method and productions (108 &os). Obviously, it is true that Kurbas as an artist was more linked with the searchings of Gordon Craig, Otto Brahm and Max Reinhardt, but the typological parallels between the artistic principles and works of the Russian and Ukrainian directors are beyond doubt essential and still need special investigation.

As for the pivotal theme of the book, it is profoundly elucidated. Being an experienced Shakespeare scholar, Irena Makaryk knows the history of the Ukrainian theatre and drama, as well as Ukrainian political history very well. I would just like to call attention to a few inexactitudes which could be noticed by the specialists.

Makaryk's statement that Shakespeare in the nineteenth-century Russia "was known and loved in his melodramatic variants" and "perhaps this fact goes some way to explaining Tolstoy's infamous attack on the English playwright" (15) is rather far from the truth. There were different trends in performing Shakespeare in the Russian theatre of the nineteenth century, and Tolstoy's *crusade* against the Bard was determined by deeper reasons. The scholar writes that "Ukrainian and Russian contribution to international modernism only began to be more fully revealed after the fall of the USSR" (29). That is not exactly true of Russian modernism, whose contribution to the world culture had begun "to be more fully revealed" dozens of years earlier. Mentioning Kurbas's production of Bernard Shaw's play *The Devil's Disciple* at the Solovetsky camp in 1936, the scholar quotes "General Burgoyne's response to Dudgeon's appeal to the future: 'History, sir, will tell lies, as usual'" (198). In fact it is the general's response not to Dick Dudgeon's "appeal", but a rhetorical question of another character, Major Swindon. The Ukrainian playwright Ivan Mykytenko was not really "shot" (198) but committed suicide pending an inevitable arrest. One of Stalin's satraps Lazar Kaganovich occupied various high Party and governmental positions in the USSR, but never was a "head of the secret police (GPU/NKVD)", as it is indicated on the page 179. In addition to the afore-

mentioned incongruences, I also found it strange that the scholar did not mention two intrinsic articles on Kurbas's theatre «Berezil'» written and published by the great Russian poet Osip Mandel'shtam in 1926.¹

Estimating Irena Makaryk's book as a whole I can say that it is a concentrated study of the important and topical problem. The monograph is well illustrated, commented, and supplied with a helpful bibliography. Surely, it will be of real use and interest to Shakespeare scholars as well as historians of the Eastern European theatre.

Works Cited

Mandel'shtam, O. *Slovo i kul'tura*. Moscow: Sov. Pisatel', 1987.

¹ See O. Mandel'shtam: 227–233.
