

Theatre Reviews

Some Shakespeare productions on the Turkish stage in 2017-2018: a one-man *Hamlet*, an all-wet *Romeo and Juliet*, and an all-male *Merry Wives of Windsor*.

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William Shakespeare is generally considered the greatest dramatist the world has ever known and the finest poet who has written in the English language. Today, he is more present in Turkey than ever. This is partly due to the spectacular growth of his popularity among Turkish people who consider him the symbol of literary and aesthetic values. The present review focuses on three Turkish Shakespeare productions of the 2017-2018 season, namely Bülent Emin Yarar's one-man *Hamlet*; *Romeo and Juliet* produced by the Istanbul State Theatre and directed by Dejan Projkovski; and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* by the Antalya State Theatre.

An exciting one-man version of *Hamlet* or “Meddah Hamlet”

For the Turkish audience, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is by far the best introduction to the playwright's complete works. Talat Halman, the first Minister of Culture of Turkey, argues that “*Hamlet*, as everywhere else, is the jewel in Turkey's Shakespearean crown. In the past 100 years there have been 20 full-dress productions –and in 2004 a ballet version entitled *Naked Hamlet*. Nine different *Hamlet* translations have been published in book form” (17). Halman's review communicates the essence of the Turkish appropriation of the play. *Hamlet* is recognized as a major figure by the Turkish audience. One could say that the play was written for the Turkish audience, functioning as a tool to resolve any

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cultural conflict between Turkish spectators and the works of the greatest English-speaking playwright.

A one-man version of *Hamlet* was introduced by the Istanbul State Theatre a few years ago, starring Bülent Emin Yarar, an actor in his fifties. The talented actor played all the characters and only used parts of the original text in a ninety-minute show. His performance, by any standards, was a solo “tour de force”. The intertwining of his brilliant acting skills with the well-worked text introduced a unique presentation of the uninterrupted descent into the Prince’s “madness”, bringing his heart and soul to the words.

The stage scenery reflected the mind of the set and costume designer Hakan Dünder. He set the action inside a large red clamshell-like structure, which could also be seen as a big red ring box, which opened facing the audience revealing the sole performer and functioning as the stage space.

The performance stuck resolutely to the three major elements of theatre: the text, the audience and the performer. The director Işıl Kasapoğlu seemed quite successful in that, because he simply followed the basic storyline, truly understanding the essence of Shakespearean drama. Working from a translation by Sabahattin Eyüboğlu, the director streamlined some of the action and reduced the cast to one actor. And Yarar played Old Hamlet (the Ghost) with as much accuracy as he did young Hamlet.

The production could be characterized as the bare bones of the play, as Yarar impersonated all the characters in a shortened version of the original play. At this point one may ask a simple, naïve, yet unavoidable question: Is Hamlet a meddah? A meddah is a traditional, long-established storyteller from Ottoman times. The storytellers gave performances in front of a small audience, in public squares, coffee houses, or even private houses. They were particularly popular in the Ottoman times from the 16th century onwards. The meddahs would tell their stories with great delight, as they changed characters, the tone of their voice, dialects, and also props such as food, a chair, or headwear.

Commenting on the qualities of a meddah, Metin And argues that “[u]sually these storytellers (meddahs) represented several different people by imitating peculiarities of dialects and behaviours, which demanded considerable skill... The storyteller knows various methods of creating and holding suspense and introducing surprise, and employs diverse techniques: inserting pauses, switching from conversational speech to chanting, moving the arms and head in sweeping gestures, whispering, screaming, and pounding his feet. He thus imparts to the audience the wide range of passions and feelings experienced by the narrators” (21). To achieve this effect in the play, director Kasapoğlu and script editor Zeynep Avcı had to rearrange the text.

In an interview with Gülin Dede Tekin in 2018, when he was asked if there was any form of meddah (storyteller) in his one-man *Hamlet*, Yarar said: “This is something spontaneous. It’s good for us. Some called it meddah, but we

did not name it. It is somehow experienced by the audience” (Dede Tekin). But with his performance, Yazar guided the audience through Shakespeare’s original text, almost in the way a traditional meddah/storyteller might do, giving a glimpse of the character upon which they could build using their own imagination.

What made this performance so unique is that Kasapoğlu and Avcı rearranged and adapted the play so well for a one-man show. In this play’s world, all the characters except Hamlet are illusory; the main character changes roles to impersonate different characters. This strengthens the metadramatic aspect of the play, and the concept is also philosophically thought-provoking in that everything except Hamlet is illusion.

In order to better understand the development of illusion, we need to pay special attention to the well-known Shakespearean assumption expressed here by John Lawlor: “the world of appearance is largely the world of illusion, and this illusion is the projection of ourselves, our dominant interests. Thus there is blindness to what is outside our own conception; and so our guesses about each other can be disastrously wrong” (42). John Dover Wilson deepens this perspective when he suggests that it is an illusion that the play has a heart, that the “mystery itself is an illusion, that Hamlet is an illusion. The secret that lies behind it all is not Hamlet’s, but Shakespeare’s” (229).



Bülent Emin Yarar in *Hamlet* (2017-2018)
(© The Turkish State Theatres Refik Ahmet Sevengil Digital Theatre Archive and Library)

Shakespeare employed a wide range of technical and literary devices to create the dominant and overwhelming theme of illusion that is amplified throughout the entire play, which is organized around various pairs of opposing forces. Hamlet appears to oscillate between lunacy and sanity; he is as much a man of thought as he is a man of action; and he can be proclaimed a coward and a hero. These opposing forces and illusions were skilfully communicated by Yarar throughout the entire play as he apparently brought his own feelings to it and felt what he was portraying. His acting skills fully captured the audience and brought them to a point where they experienced each and every feeling portrayed on the stage, including the hidden depths and elusive nuances of the characters.

With one actor dressed in black, using colourful accessories for different characters, this performance stands as a showcase for the brilliant acting skills of Bülent Emin Yarar, who endowed the characters with all the features of his own personality. Throughout the performance of this inventive solo *Hamlet*, we could track his transformation from a helpless man to a passionate character, from passivity to action. Yarar excelled in this challenging and demanding task and the audience could not help being drawn into the mood swings and internal conflict of the titular character. For over an hour and a half Yarar held the whole audience in the palm of his hand, allowing no one to even breathe until the red ring box, or clamshell-like set piece, closed down on him.

In this exciting one-man version of *Hamlet*, there was truth in every character portrayed by Yarar, who performed with the accompaniment of two sad-faced flautists, Yasemin Taş and Özge Özdemir. Their music strikingly conveyed the shades of emotions and turbulent thoughts of the Prince and suggested each and every feeling of the other characters. As Falk Hübner remarked, “[t]he musicians on stage were thus staged and composed as if they were ‘playing’ the roles of musicians in a play, instead of ‘merely’ functioning as on-stage musicians in the larger musical context” (64).

By any standards, Bülent Emin Yarar’s solo *Hamlet* was an outstanding performance of Hamlet’s tragedy in such an amazing production, that it will be remembered as the way such tragedies should be performed: violently intense, unbelievably powerful, and staggeringly clever.

A rain of tears on Romeo and Juliet: the flood of love

The passionate battle of water and fire was presented at the State Theatre in İstanbul, where *Romeo and Juliet* opened in a powerful and explosive brand-new production. This unforgettable show, directed by the general manager of the Macedonian National Theatre, Dejan Projkovski, featured water –tons of it. The

centrepiece of this Verona was a large, enigmatic pond, which functioned as the stage space, apparently for specific dramatic and symbolic purposes. In contrast, there was fire raging within the blood of each and every character, a conflagration so destructive that it threatened to transform Shakespeare's quintessential tragic love story into a collective funeral pyre.

The use of water on stage can be utterly stunning. In recent years, many directors introduced water in their productions, including Vesturport Theatre's amazing *Woyzeck*, Bush Theatre's *In the Red and Brown Water*, or Chichester Festival Theatre's *The Gondoliers*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Seagull* and *The Water Babies*, and so on.

Although water involves challenges ranging from health and safety hazards to keeping the performers warm enough throughout the show, from waterproofing electrical cables to hygiene issues, it is worth it for the wow factor. It is simply captivating. There is almost nothing more sensational and striking than using water onstage, and Projkovski is apparently fond of it. For him, water symbolizes the unstoppable tears, connected to words, thoughts and feelings, pain and sorrow, and most importantly love, a fierce, intense, and uncontrollable force superseding all other values and feelings. In his production, water was used to symbolize the unstoppable tears that neither Romeo nor Juliet imagined being able to swim out of.



A scene from *Romeo and Juliet*. Atakan Akarsu (Romeo) and Damla Ece Dereli (Juliet)
(© The Turkish State Theatres Refik Ahmet Sevengil Digital Theatre Archive and Library)

This unforgettable production featured live music and an outstanding new ensemble of actors, starring Damla Ece Dereli as a Juliet truly to die for, and Atakan Akarsu as a quintessential Romeo.

This version of the play centred on the body of water (5 tons of it) that was brought to the stage by the designer M. Nurullah Tuncer. It looked awesome, mirroring twilight and moonlight as early evening turned into night, making a great dramatic and aesthetic impression. For a Shakespearean play like *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night* or even *The Comedy of Errors*, imbued with maritime adventure, it might be relevant to turn on all the taps. But for *Romeo and Juliet*, where the flame and lightning are the most dominant images? As Helen Morris says, “[i]n *Romeo and Juliet*, the dominant imagery is concerned with light – sun, moon, stars, candles, gunpowder, lightning, fire, torches– many times repeated” (71).

The traditional readings and stagings of *Romeo and Juliet* suggest a portrayal of an innocent and victimized love in the darkness of feud-ridden Verona, whereas Projkovski brought a novel approach to the play. Black-haired and luminously pale, Damla Ece Dereli was the perfect, innocent Juliet. She was such a shining candle light that the water motif after all stood to reason in the final death scene of the play. It takes much water to quench such a large and destructive fire.

In this production the ultimate tragic love story was centred on the Adige river, the second longest river in Italy, on whose shores the province of Verona spreads. The water onstage looked great, reflecting the romantic moonlight, but the focus on the Adige river also served and functioned as a split. The city is divided geographically, culturally and socially by the Adige, while Romeo and Juliet are separated by powerful physical, social and emotional barriers at first, and finally driven apart forever through death.

On the other hand, the director used water as a symbol of rebirth, cleansing and purity. For the two star-crossed lovers, the water served as a medium that joined them together as one. Through water, their love became an archetype, expressing the passionate longing to be united and loved forever. In the water, the relationship of Romeo and Juliet and anything else is possible. This type of love passion is cleansing, and it is the water image that best represents their flood of love for each other. As Jennifer L. Martin notes, “[t]his use of water suggests purity, a spiritual component to their love” (45).

The symbol of water can also be associated with regeneration of life, creativity, and wisdom. If the two families were not feuding, Montague and Capulet would have probably arranged a marriage between their children, since Romeo would make a good husband for Juliet, and such a union could have ended the feud between the houses of Montague and Capulet, and even united their fortunes. In the final blazing glory of their deaths, the two lovers end the long-lasting feud with their blood.

Merry Merry Wives of Windsor: an all-male cast

When Shakespeare wrote *Henry IV, Part 1* in the late 1590s, the character of Falstaff was a break-out hit, popular enough to fuel a sequel (*Henry IV, Part 2*) and a spin-off (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*)—allegedly written at the request of Elizabeth I, who was so taken by Falstaff that she wished to see him in love. Complying with this royal order, Shakespeare detached Falstaff from the historical background of the *Henry* plays (1402-1413) and placed him in Shakespeare's own time.

Unlike Shakespeare's other plays, this one is set in the playwright's England and features ordinary middle-class characters. Being the only comedy that the playwright set in his native land, it provides a realistic portrait of England. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* features middle-class characters, powerful women and a main male character wildly pinched. As Jonathan Bate argues, "the title of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* suggests that this is a play in which women will be happily dominant" (3).

The Antalya State Theatre's production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, directed by Nesimi Kaygusuz, best known for his role as Derviş Kasım in the film *Yunus Emre: Aşkın Sesi*, delivered the "merry" promised in the title. The play was performed by an all-male cast with Elizabethan costumes, music and dance.



A scene from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (2017-2018)
(© The Turkish State Theatres Refik Ahmet Sevengil Digital Theatre Archive and Library)

The director resolutely stuck to the original practices of Shakespeare's time in terms of casting, costumes, set design and music. And perhaps the most challenging task was the choice of replicating as many of the original theatrical practices of Shakespeare's own company as possible, i.e. an entirely male cast with authentically Elizabethan costumes. The absence of women in the cast was justified by this concept of "original practices" introduced by the director. Women were not allowed to be on the commercial English stage, at least not until the Restoration of King Charles II. In Shakespeare's day, it was believed that it was impure and improper for women to act, as they were expected to be housewives and mothers. As Erin M. McLaughlin states, "Elizabethan theatre companies solely used males for all parts as the stage was not thought to be a place for women to display themselves" (13). And if there were men's jobs and women's jobs, acting was definitely a man's job. Therefore, women must be kept within the confines of the family and could in no way be permitted to appear in public. Commenting on women on stage, Hugh Hunt also argues that "[i]n drama she was considered immoral if she appeared on stage; until recently the terms 'actress' and 'whore' were considered to be almost synonymous" (182).

Casting entirely male actors plays a significant role for any Shakespearean play, as it does with this version of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Kaygusuz took a bold step to explore the playwright's rich approach to gender onstage, with a well-worked text and an entirely male cast. Apparently, he did a great job with textual emendation, eliminating dated jokes and streamlining the play into what would be a modern sitcom. He also created an atmosphere where all the actors knew each other, most probably in a sense of belonging, another big achievement of the director.

The all-male cast had good energy, and the roles were enriched with funny, spot-on characteristics. But no production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* can succeed without a good Falstaff, and Selim Bayraktar was up for the task. The highlight of this production was undoubtedly his performance, with his stylized voice and vivid acting. Best known as "Sümbül Ağa" in *The Magnificent Century*, a Turkish historical TV series based on the life of Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent, he had the rich voice and impressive demeanour necessary to bring the fat, vain and boastful knight into life, and grabbed the viewers' attention from the very first moment he appeared on the stage.

Hakan Dünder's Elizabethan style set design looked fascinating, fitting naturally to the beautiful stage. This open set allowed the actors' full use of the stage's many entrances and exits. Efe Ünal's musical sequences were terrific, and dynamically choreographed by Nazlı Uğurtaş. The stunning period costumes were created by Esra Selah.

Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* is not often performed or filmed. The Antalya State Theatre's production of the play, therefore, offered a unique opportunity to see if its popularity can be recreated. This was achieved through

the creative talent and inventive imagination of the production team, who made this relatively unknown play a popular hit.

All things considered, this production displayed a keen understanding of what is best in Shakespeare's comedy, and the chief result was the emergence of a new, authentic Shakespeare, who was both ancient and modern, both old and new.

Conclusion

There are countless Shakespearean plays running on several stages in Turkey, and apparently they are increasing in quality and quantity. More and more Shakespearean plays are produced with never-failing energy. These productions, whether big or small, mark the active legacy of the Immortal Bard in Turkey.

As E. S. Ç. Mazanoğlu argues, "[e]very staging of Shakespeare's plays on the Turkish stage by the State Theatre, İstanbul City Theatre and private theatres has presented a distinctive, creative and constructive output" (123). The Shakespearean tradition in Turkey is an ongoing process that is open to new readings, writings, interpretations, as well as new forms of acting and staging. The productions of solo *Hamlet* and all-wet *Romeo and Juliet* by the İstanbul State Theatre, and the all-male *Merry Wives of Windsor* by the Antalya State Theatre were all unique, special and big productions that have proven successful. Turkey is a cultural mosaic where Shakespeare can be studied, taught and interpreted as part of this mosaic through a cultural fusion that brings new Shakespeare productions on stage.

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