

Makaryk, Irena R. *Shakespeare in the Undiscovered Bourn: Les Kurbas, Modernism, and Early Soviet Cultural Politics*. Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2004 (pp 257). ISBN 080208849X.

“Kurbas made Shakespeare their uncomfortable contemporary and critic,” Makaryk writes about the Ukrainians’ reception of the 1924 version of *Macbeth*, directed by the modernist Les Kurbas. Director, actor, playwright, film-maker, and translator, Kurbas introduced Shakespeare to the Ukrainian stage and positioned these productions in the *avant-garde* direction. Irena Makaryk’s study situates Shakespeare within the ideological and cultural debates of the early Soviet period and investigates three important productions from the postcolonial critical perspective. Les Kurbas and his *Macbeth* (1920; 1924), Panas Saksahansky’s *Othello* (1926), and Hnat Yura’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1927) were Shakespearean versions filtered through Ukrainian lenses, which contributed to a major redefinition of national identity. As Makaryk argues, artists confirmed the historical role of Ukraine as a crossroads between various cultures, “an undiscovered bourn” (7). Makaryk takes Shakespeare as a site of intercultural exchange and explores the avatars of Ukrainian productions in the early Soviet era.

The first and best move that Makaryk makes is to ascertain the “cultural plasticity” (5), in Ortiz and Rama’s terms, of the Ukrainian encounter with Shakespeare, rather than offering a general paradigm of the colonizer-colonized relationship. The study evidences the paradox of the reception of Shakespeare in the early Soviet period, when the English playwright’s canonical status and position as a “classic” went alongside the political issues of the double revolution in the Russian empire in 1917—World War and Civil War—and the necessity of the creation of a repertoire for the national theater. In her evaluation of Ukraine’s complex and contradictory relationship to Shakespeare, Makaryk raises issues of hybridity, authenticity, cultural appropriation, essentialism, liberal humanism, and the problematic of identity politics, although she wisely avoids the rather aggressive and dual term “appropriation.” This study is about the way in which Ukrainian directors assimilated and reconfigured Shakespeare and the classics, as well as the theatrical styles of the past, in order to discover a new theatrical idiom.

The first two chapters are on Les Kurbas’s modernist version of Shakespeare’s plays. The early productions of *Romeo and Juliet* (1919) and *Macbeth* (1919-1920) were adapted to political interpretations, stylization, and an exploration of theatricality. The feud between the Capulets and the Montagues could stand for several political oppositions, while the figure of

Macbeth might be associated with the power-hungry type of opportunist in the early Soviet period. The next chapter deals with Kurbas's 1924 *Macbeth*, a notable production performed with his Berezil troupe in Kyiv. A re-examination of theatrical representation itself, Kurbas's production was an example of the way in which the classics were attuned to the spectators' responses and the director's creativity, or, as Makaryk defines it, "a cubist expressionist production, which would reflect his beliefs about audience, actor, and art work" (82). The first two chapters show how Kurbas tested all the conventions, preconceptions, and materials of the theater, including Shakespeare's canonical status, to create his own synthesis, in the modernist Ukrainian style.

The two remaining chapters follow the same structure as they take up the topics, respectively, of Panas Saksahansky's *Othello* (1926) and Hnat Yura's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1927). Here, too, Makaryk stresses the intercultural readability of Shakespeare in Ukrainian context, but explains how Saksahansky's *Othello* "domesticated" (113) Shakespeare and integrated the production within issues of popularity, nationality, and ethnographic theater, while Yura's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* marked the "beginning of the decline and calcification of Soviet art" (144), pushing it towards Socialist Realism. Although it was the second Shakespeare play to be produced on the Ukrainian stage, in the industrial town of Katerynoslav (later Dnipopetrovsk), Saksahansky's version of *Othello* was a historical costume drama focusing on character and performed in the heroic-romantic mode. Similarly, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by Hnat Yura was "a production with expressionistic-constructivist overtones" (166), an example of the way in which Shakespeare's "reiterated iconic name served as shorthand for various, sometimes contradictory ideas" (145) in the early Soviet era.

The fifth and last chapter presents the clamorous annunciation and coronation of a mediocre playwright-propagandist, Ivan Mykytenko, with his play *Dictatorship* (*Dyktatura*) as the long-awaited "Soviet Shakespeare" (177) in the wake of the Soviet Cultural Revolution of 1928, which was to reshape theater life in Ukraine and throughout the Soviet Union. This sterile mythologizing gesture revealed the paradox of most Communist representations of Shakespeare: on the one hand, it dismissed Shakespeare's superiority as compared to Soviet achievements, and on the other, it acknowledged his greatness. As Makaryk observes, "[i]n the early Soviet period, Shakespeare and other classics filled the gap in the repertoire when deafening silence met reiterated, desperate calls for new playwrights, new Shakespeares of the Revolution" (5). In this contradictory period, the author

convincingly notes, “It had become more important to use Shakespeare than to stage or study him” (180).

The end-result of Makaryk’s study is a highly readable, up-to-date, and well-organized volume. Makaryk is authoritative yet accessible, opinionated yet balanced, lively yet erudite. The flaws are remarkably few and, in contrast, the virtues are many. One of these is that the book meets the needs of both experts and novices. The former will enjoy the cogent discussions of familiar material on theatrical appropriation and production history, but they are almost certain to be surprised by something they do not know: the fate of a talented Ukrainian director during the grim Stalinist years. The latter (students and general readers) will appreciate the clear introduction and method statement, as well as the insight in a theater world with which they are less familiar. Therefore, this book deserves a spot on the shelf of every scholar of production history and it should be in the hands of all serious students and the general readers as well.

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