



## Theatre Reviews

***Twelfth Night*. Dir. Justin Anderson. Metropol Theatre, Tirana, Albania.**

Reviewed by *Marinela Golemi\**

In *Twelfth Night*, Viola is separated from her twin brother Sebastian after a shipwreck in the Adriatic Sea. In this moment of uncertainty, Viola asks, “What country, friends, is this?” (1.2.1), and her captain recognizes this unfamiliar place as Illyria. Illyria is often identified as present-day Albania because of 19<sup>th</sup>-century British travel writers. When Mary Edith Durham visited Albania in 1902, she wrote that Illyrian tribes resided in Northern or “High Albania” (1). Similarly, Lord Byron’s famous visit to Albania was monumented by a portrait of him clad in Albanian dress, and letters which romanticized Albanian culture and history. As David Fermor suggests, Byron “produced an ‘imagined geography’ of Albania as a wild and exotic realm of the Oriental ‘other’”, misrepresenting it as a stage for his travels (1). A romantic notion of national identity formed around Illyrian descent as a means of laying claim to Western history (Dzino 16). Most Albanians take pride in the commonly accepted theory that they are Illyrian descendants. Ledio Xhoxhi, for example, writes that “Shakespeare has never been in our Illyria, but he has written about her in the comedy *Twelfth Night*”. Nearly three decades after its 1987 premiere in Albanian theatre, Justin Anderson and Jonida Beqo’s 2018 production of *Twelfth Night (Nata e Dymbëdhjetë)*, staged at the Metropol Theatre in Tirana, revitalizes this link between history and fiction. In this production, Shakespeare’s tale finds its Illyrian home.

The performance opens with live instrumental music as the siblings and the ship’s crew dance to cheerful Albanian rhythms. The bare, blue and dimly lit stage becomes the ship. At the sound of thunder, the dancers take hold of long blue chiffon fabrics that drop from the sky and become the sea waves that

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separate the siblings. The production's concern with place surfaces from the initial moment when the Albanian music and costumes are heard and seen. Then, the answer to the first line of the show, Viola's question, "Çfare vendi është ky, o kapitan?" ("What country is this, captain?"), is obvious and familiar—an Albanian Illyria. As a result of localization, Cesario, Malvolio, Sir Toby and Maria are renamed Çerçiz, Maliq, Tobi and Maro, respectively. Moreover, all the actors are dressed in traditional Albanian garments, most notably the fustanella (a Balkan kilt), while live Albanian folk music guides the whole performance.

Albanian music, consisting of a tambourine, clarinets and accordions, is integral to the production, because it limits and propels the plot. The live vocalist band sings to transition from scene to scene and to evoke emotional responses from the audience that surrounds the stage in their high chairs. A female lead singer joins in a mournful tune as Olivia enters the stage to pay respects to her dead brother, represented by a mannequin torso dressed in his clothes. As Marcus Cheng Chye Tan argues, music is performative and "musical range can determine or disguise gender" (109). Following Tan's idea, I argue that the Albanian folk music sung by the male musicians, marked by long sustained vowel sounds that imitate crying, reflects the patriarchal and homosocial tradition which musically guides the plot. Moreover, the iso-polyphony underscores the palimpsestic nature of the production that welcomes intercultural exchanges but ultimately chooses to return to Illyria.

Anderson and Beqo's *Twelfth Night* exemplifies both intercultural and intracultural relations and tensions as evidenced by the migratory nature of the play and their collaboration. When Viola and Sebastian arrive in Illyria, their attire indicates that they're Albanian, not foreigners. Their clothes represent their class and regional background. For example, men wear a traditional round wool cap called "qelesh", as a national symbol of Albanian identity. This varies across regions: Sir Andrew wears a red cloth around his cap to mark his Northern Albanian identity, whereas Sir Toby and Malvolio sport a tall cap to signify that they are from Southern Albania. As for Orsino, he wears a flat-topped red cap to indicate his high class and wealth. Although all men wear the traditional "xhamadan" vest, their class status in the court is represented by their woven belts: golden for Toby, black with red and white stripes for the rest. Only Cesario and Sebastian wear black flat-topped caps to underline their foreignness. The clown's attire consists of a black cloak and pantaloons, and a wool flower on his cap.

The women's attire also varies from Southern to Northern Albania as indicated by the shape of the sleeves, the skirts, and the embroidery. Thus, the production celebrates intracultural exchanges between Southern and Northern Albania. The twin plots also reflect the cultural and political differences between Northern and Southern Albania, as suggested by the different costumes of the

characters. The fashion of the play centers on gender, but in the Albanian production ethnicity, class and cultural regionality are palimpsestic.

The use of traditional Albanian music and costumes celebrates the local, while also emphasizing a patriarchal and heteronormative society. Hence, the production registers anxiety about changes in sexual behaviour in Albania. Any moments of physical interaction or near-kissing scenes between Cesario and Orsino are interrupted. The ending especially reinforces the status quo regarding acceptable representations of Albanian masculinity and sexuality when Orsino informs Cesario, who has let her hair down and removed her fake mustache, that “Çerçiz I will call you as long as you are dressed like a man, but when you are dressed like a woman, a princess and a queen you’ll be for me”. The crowd giggles when she dips him for a kiss, but, ultimately, she returns dressed as Viola for the wedding celebrations, where the men and women perform separate gendered dances, before they all join together in a “shota” circle dance, as is customary in Albanian weddings. Thus, the performance concludes by honouring local traditions that uphold patriarchy and heteronormativity.

In the end, the homoeroticism between Cesario and Orsino is justified by the female body underneath, whereas the relationship between Antonio and Sebastian remains ambiguous and alludes to Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick’s definition of homosocial bonds between men that maintain patriarchy (1-2). In Act 2, Scene 2, Antonio kneels to apologize for his bad service, Sebastian joins him, and they hold hands until Sebastian exits. Antonio’s decision to follow him because he “adores” him (2.2.43) is translated as “te dua” to mean “I love you”. This is the only opportune moment when their relationship and love is ambivalent. Yet, the production doesn’t experiment with the homoeroticism between them because of local cultural limitations imposed on adaptations. The ambivalence that the production depicts toward gender and same-sex relationships reflects Albania’s desire to join the EU while also maintaining a historically rooted (Illyrian) cultural identity that is unique but still benefits from global encounters.

The paradoxical desire to be global but maintain a local identity is embodied in Justin Anderson and Jonida Beqo’s Albanian production of *Twelfth Night*. The artistic collaboration between the directors, theatres, and cultures exemplifies the glocal essence of non-Anglophone Shakespeare performances, which are never either local or global, but always somewhere and something in between. Anderson expresses his hope that these “intentional intersections [. . .] will allow an audience to not only receive something that is at once familiar from a literary and theatrical standpoint, but to experience a story that is both for and of the historical context of Albania” (Johns). Although the production upholds local culture, it is supported by a global literary, theatrical, and industrial force. Marcela Kostihová describes this as a “two-fold desire to ‘return’ into the fold of (Western) European countries and also a return to

essential [Albanian] nationhood” (132). The production captured the desire of a globally isolated country to maintain a bridge to Western Europe as well as a means of navigating Albanianess.



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***Troilus and Cressida*. Dir. Alexandros Cohen. Argo theatre, Athens, Greece.**

***Troilus and Cressida*. Dir. Maria Panourgia. The National Theatre, Rex theatre, Athens, Greece.**

Reviewed by *Xenia Georgopoulou*\*

### ***Troilus and Cressida* Between Two Extremes**

On 7 December 2021 Alexandros Cohen's production of *Troilus and Cressida* premiered at the Argo theatre in Athens. Once more, after *Timon of Athens* (2014) and *Cymbeline* (2016), the director chose to stage a Shakespearean play that is rarely performed, in Greece or elsewhere. And yet, on 11 March 2022, the same play appeared on the "Eleni Papadaki" stage at the Rex theatre in Athens, in a production of the National Theatre of Greece, directed by Maria Panourgia.

Having watched both productions, I saw two diametrically opposed views of the play's world. Cohen created a more sophisticated image of the two adversaries, putting both his Greeks and his Trojans around office tables, where they discussed their next moves sitting on office chairs, in a set (designed by Giannis Arvanitis) that also included three clocks and several props that alluded to an office (large notice boards, dossiers, desk lamps, several items of stationery etc.). On the contrary, Panourgia opted for a primitive background, where the Greek and Trojan tents were represented by two African-style huts, and the Greeks and Trojans themselves moved like apes,<sup>1</sup> supposedly eating some kind of nuts that they threw to each other. However, the huts stood on a black, glossy floor (the set was designed by Myrto Lambrou), as if to remind of former luxury.

Undoubtedly, in *Troilus and Cressida* Shakespeare gives us a degraded view of the ancient world (mostly the Greek world). It is no wonder that it was one of the Shakespearean plays Karolos Koun, one of Greece's most inspired directors, staged during the dictatorship of 1967-1973, when a decadent image (due to its kitsch aesthetics) of the Greek illustrious past was used as part of the dictators' rhetoric.<sup>2</sup> However, Cohen and Panourgia chose two totally different

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<sup>1</sup> Louiza Arkoumanea admits that the actors' movement reminded of Anthropidae (Big Apes).

<sup>2</sup> On this connection see Georgopoulou, *Shakespeare Horizontally and Vertically*, 21-23.

ways to illustrate the fall of ancient heroes and values described by Shakespeare. Cohen apparently focused on the moral degradation of political games, showing us on stage a room where decisions were made, which was actually the same for both parts. Panourgia, on the other hand, saw this decadence as a return to a primitive condition. However, the decline of a civilization does not mean a return to its origins, so, to me, this idea made no sense at first sight. And yet Louiza Arkoumanea in her review provides an interesting view of the production, describing the space created by Panourgia as

a fluid space of dawn and dusk, at the distant past and our possible future, where we are animals and humans at once, where pre-human meets meta-human, at the beginning of civilization and at its imminent end.

The decline of ancient values and ideals in Shakespeare's play is also illustrated by the Greek and Trojan heroes' idleness, underlined in the National's production by the costumes, designed by Ioanna Tsami, which consisted mostly of white underwear and padding around the actors' buttocks and thighs that looked like additional fat on their bodies. These figures, too far from the idealized bodies of ancient heroes (Bouras), definitely added to the decadent image of both adversaries, giving indeed an impression of idleness and looseness.

The depiction of this idleness was also one of Cohen's goals, too. In his director's note in the programme he explains the basis of his staging: "In order to highlight this dense, philosophical, 'precious' text, we tried to put aside anything that causes or forwards the action, and to be led, if possible, towards a more intense immobility, which could even verge on apathy" (6). This choice was in line with the overall aesthetics of the production as described by Cohen: "We decided that the closest aesthetics would be that of the Parnassist poets, who sought the containment of passion and intense feelings, aimed chiefly at calmness and serenity". "However", Cohen pursues, "as human nature is hard to tame, we consciously organized within the production short cracks which disrupt the Parnassist aesthetics and give room to Romanticism and deep sentimental involvement" (6-7).

Panourgia, on the other hand, in her much shorter director's note with the title "Almost Humans", mentions different sources of inspiration from different cultures, eastern and western. She put the characters in a primitive environment (which she also saw as futuristic) that she called "Sad Tropics", from Claude Lévi-Strauss's book *Tristes tropiques*. "The creatures that inhabit this unfinished world", Panourgia explains, "behave like hungry ghosts from Thibetan mythology, who eat non-stop but never satisfy their appetite" (7). This constant eating activity seemed to be in line with Shakespeare's text, in a play

where both men and women are described as food.<sup>3</sup> Eri Kyrgia also observes that *Troilus and Cressida* is the only Shakespearean play where so many characters use food symbolism to express a variety of feelings (21). Panourgia's creatures also embodied "the emptiness and narcissism of Casanova", or they were "overwhelmed by a mad desire for blood, as in the legendary *Nosferatu* by Friedrich Murnau" (7). The Casanovan narcissism was hard to be traced in the subhuman form that Panourgia had chosen for her characters (although Louiza Arkoumanea traced their self-admiration as their bodies reflected on the glossy floor); however, *Nosferatu* could be brought to mind by the long, sharp teeth protruding from several actors' mouths—though only if the spectator had read the director's note in the programme. In this primitive context, these teeth rather recalled certain species of apes with long, sharp canines, such as gorillas. In the world created by Panourgia, the characters "move as in a dream or like semi-conscious ghosts that are driven in the state of bardo, between life and death, where war lasts for ever" (Panourgia).

In the National's production, the costumes, with the same paddings for both male and female actors, somehow dulled the two sexes' bodily differences. It is no wonder that Panourgia also used actresses for male parts (Eudoxia Androulidaki played Priam and Agamemnon, and Theano Metaxa was also given the part of Aeneas). On the other hand, Cohen used an all-female cast, except for the part of Troilus. Rafika Chawishe, who played Hector, referred to the cast as a "modern female chorus" (Kranioti). As Cohen explained to me, in a personal conversation I had with him, he believes that modern society seems to return to some secret matriarchy, where women, whom he regards as more antagonistic, have a more active role in decision making. As for Troilus, he saw him as a rather passive character, which made him choose a male actor for the part.<sup>4</sup>

But what was the overall impression of the two productions? Panourgia argued that "[a]lthough the play is characterized as satirical-grotesque, there is nothing funny in this wild depiction of human nature" (7). Stella Charami also observed that "the comical element [wa]s hardly recognized", despite the fact that she traced a "cold ridiculousness" in the production. On the other hand, Konstantinos Bouras saw a "constant overloading with forced comical element". I have to admit that there were some dramatic moments in the National's *Troilus and Cressida* (one of the strongest being Cassandra's appearance, played by three actresses forming a circle), and yet the element of the grotesque was more

<sup>3</sup> On this metaphor see Georgopoulou, "Food and Identity in Shakespeare's Plays", 75.

<sup>4</sup> In the past, Cohen has even turned male characters into female in his Shakespearean productions, as in *Timon of Athens*, where Flavius became Flavia, or *Cymbeline*, where Pisanio became Cornelia. On this matter see Georgopoulou, *Shakespeare Horizontally and Vertically*, 54-56.

than evident, due to the costumes and the overall movement of Panourgia's creatures. As Bouras points out, the paddings around the actors' buttocks and thighs reminded of the *somation*, a grotesque costume accessory used in ancient Greek comedy performances. Despite the fact that he acknowledges the inverted image of the Greek ideals in Shakespeare's play, the critic regards Panourgia's aesthetic choice as a caricature that ridicules Shakespeare's play.

I would agree with Charami that in Panourgia's staging of *Troilus and Cressida* the "particular visual identity outweigh[ed] the staging function", leading to an "introvert" result. Similarly, Nikos Xenios argued that the production was "aesthetically autonomous", but "deviate[d] from the original concept of the play". Nevertheless, no matter whether Panourgia's visual choices made sense or not, her staging certainly depicted a decadent world which is definitely there in Shakespeare's text. On the other hand, Cohen's production proved that there is no need to resort to extreme aesthetic choices to illustrate Shakespeare's degraded antiquity; the director may as well create a more sophisticated environment for his characters, focusing on the philosophical aspect of Shakespeare's text to the same end.

Both directors, in their own ways, transmitted to their audience Shakespeare's description of a whole world's fall that seems irreversible. And yet Arkoumanea saw hope, "a ray of light", in Panourgia's *Troilus and Cressida*. Charami, on the contrary, argued that the director's reading was "even more pessimistic [than Shakespeare's] (if not nihilistic), since it allude[d] directly to primitive civilizations and savage tribes". As for the director herself, she believes that there is no optimism at all in the play itself, and she did not want to change that (Marinou, Zois). Cohen also sees in the play the description of "an era of ultimate cynicism, when heroes and ideals have collapsed" (Xanthos).

But if there is no hope in the play, both directors find hope in artistic creation. "What we can do is plan and hope", Cohen says (Theodorakou), and Panourgia locates hope in "what we do, what we can still dream of" (Marinou).



*Troilus and Cressida*, dir. Alexandros Cohen. Photograph by Patroklos Skafidas



*Troilus and Cressida*, dir. Maria Panourgia. Photograph by Karol Jarek

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<sup>5</sup> The second part of the title is a paraphrased Greek proverb.

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