

Theatre Reviews

***A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Dir. Armela Demaj. Metropol Theatre, Tirana, Albania.**

Reviewed by *Marinela Golemi**

Although the National Theatre of Albania in Tirana was demolished on 17 May 2020, its legacy carried on online. In light of this culturally devastating event and due to limitations occasioned by the pandemic, the Nationwide Theatre Festival was transformed into a virtual event. The new Nationwide Online Theatre Festival was named “Moisiu On” and adopted the slogan “The theatre continues” (#teatrivazhdon) to suggest that theatre is still on and online. This was a truly intracultural experience that brought together 20 troupes from all regions of Albania who performed popular productions that had previously won the people’s hearts. The entire event was broadcast live daily on Facebook, Albania’s preferred social media platform, making it accessible to all Albanians, including Albanian diaspora like myself. Amongst the festival performances was Armela Demaj’s colourful production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (*Ëndrra e Një Nate Vere*). Although I didn’t have the chance to see the initial 2019 premiere at the Metropol Theatre, or its return to the stage in 2020 due to popular demand, I enjoyed the recorded 2021 Facebook Live production.

One of the most captivating features of the production was its spectacular use of colours. The stage set consisted of 8 large, leafless, wooden tree cut-outs, painted with green neon paint, which were evenly spaced out to occupy half of the stage and part of the balcony. The wooden ceilings and stage backdrops were entirely covered with specks of blue-green fluorescent pigment to mimic the image of a brilliantly illuminated starry sky. The blue-green hues that enfolded the stage reminded of aurora borealis. The scene appeared simultaneously fantastical and artificial because of the extraordinary spectrum of colours.

* Northern Arizona University, US. marinela.golemi@nau.edu

Demaj's production of *Ëndrra e Një Nate Vere* was reminiscent of black-light theatre, where puppeteers dressed in black, against a dark background, manipulate the puppets while remaining almost invisible. Nina Edwards suggests that the awareness of the puppeteers' presence is a crucial component of the performance because it emphasizes the skills of the artists even if they are not fully visible or centered on the stage (119). The allusion to the invisible puppeteers that perform their magic in the dark perfectly describes the roles of Oberon, Titania, and Puck. For example, Demaj's production opened in the dark, blue neon lit sky of the forest near Athens, where Puck's body was noticeable because of his neon speckled leotard and neon face painting. Through this visual trick Demaj showed that the forces of the magical green world are always present and responsible for puppeteering the actions of the coupled humans.

Through lighting, costume design and makeup, Demaj distinguished the play's fantastical elements from the ordinary, courtly setting. The background never changed; instead, the actors' journey from Athens to the forest beyond the city was illustrated by switching from white to black and blue stage lighting. For instance, in the second act, when the audience is introduced to the fairy world, the production directly mimics the black light theatre aesthetics, because only the fluorescent bodies of the dancing fairies, performing rhythmic acrobatics with neon ribbons, were visible in the black-lit starry background of the stage. Immediately afterwards, Oberon and Titania emerged on rolling pedestals from opposite stage doors as the lights turned blue and smoke arose from the ground. Overall, the green world of the play was coloured through black lighting, whereas the courtly scenes and the scenes with the mechanicals were performed under strong white light. However, there were moments when the production blended black and white lights to show how the two worlds collided. For example, when the mechanicals performed, there was a mixture of black and blue background light, with soft white light spotlights. Similarly, the stage lights blended between black and white to form a blue-white hue when Oberon and Puck meddled with the young Athenian couples. In these circumstances, colours and lights worked double duty to make the actors and stage visible and to express visually the narrative collision of the two worlds.

The visual rhetoric of Demaj's production was also expressed through costume colours. The wardrobe of all the courtly characters, apart from Hippolyta, reflected 20th-century Western European fashions. Lysander, Demetrius, Theseus and Egeus were dressed in velvet-trimmed topcoats, paisley vests, silk scarves and top hats. Similarly, the mechanicals were dressed in a variety of balloon-sleeve linen shirts with wool vests, wifebeater shirts with wide-leg pants and suspenders, bandana scarves, bowler hats, and flat caps. Demetrius sported a pastel-pink chiffon scarf that corresponded with Hermia's pastel-pink corseted dress to signal that they were a rightful pair, as her father Egeus wishes. Meanwhile, Lysander wore a dark celadon scarf that matched Helena's dress. However, when Oberon and Puck interfered in their love affairs

and the couples were confused, they removed these vestimentary signifiers. Demetrius and Lysander took off their topcoats and scarves and remained in their loosely fitted, long-sleeve white shirts and khaki pants. On the other hand, Hermia and Helena removed their bodices and long skirts to reveal white corsets and pantaloons underneath. When they were bereft of their original costume colours, the spell was reversed, and they found their true loves. Although the play ended with all four characters dressed as they were in the beginning, they were finally paired with their rightful yet colour-mismatched partners. In this manner, costume design was as affective as the words and bodies of the performers in displaying their emotional journey and showing the interrelationships between the characters.

Demaj's production was filled with chromatic spectacle and live music. The omnipresent Puck was often watching the characters from the balcony in the dark while playing music, a kalimba or a drum. For example, Puck double tapped a large drum that hung from the ceiling every 3 seconds as he introduced Titania and Oberon. Meanwhile, fluorescent petals were falling all around the stage as if bright stars were falling to the ground, making the earth a reflection of a starry sky while fairies danced around Titania and Oberon and harmonised vowel sounds in sync. Puck's epilogue was delivered under black light, and then he led the fairies offstage while also singing "hum ha". Finally, he sped up the "hum ha ha" tempo as the scene came to a climactic closure in absolute darkness. At the end, the white lights awakened the characters, the actors and the audience from a dreamy performance. This Albanian production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was a visual feast.



Photograph shared with permission from the Metropol Theatre in Tirana, Albania



Photograph shared with permission from the Metropol Theatre in Tirana, Albania



Photograph shared with permission from the Metropol Theatre in Tirana, Albania



Photograph shared with permission from the Metropol Theatre in Tirana, Albania

WORKS CITED

- Edwards, Nina. *Darkness: A Cultural History*. London: Reaktion Books, 2018.
- Teatri Kombetar. "ËNDRRA E NJË NATE VERE". <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=434663904523917/>. Accessed 5 March 2021.