

ARTICLE NO 6

SHAKESPEARE IN NICARAGUA

By Els van Poppel (Nicaragua)

Abstract

Shakespeare in Nicaragua is a brief descriptive account of practice occurring in a challenging context. The author describes how the cultural collision and collusion between Shakespeare and the streets, warehouses and villages of contemporary Nicaragua manifest themselves in the clever ways in which the physical spaces and environment are used artistically.

Abrégé

Shakespeare au Nicaragua est un compte-rendu court et descriptif d'une pratique se passant dans un contexte difficile. L'auteur décrit comment la collision et la collusion culturelles entre Shakespeare et les rues, entrepôts et villages du Nicaragua contemporain se manifestent dans les manières intelligentes avec lesquelles les espaces et l'environnement physiques sont utilisés artistiquement.

Sumario

Shakespeare en Nicaragua es un recuento breve y descriptivo de la practica teatral que ocurre dentro de un contexto desafiante. El autor describe como la colisión cultural y colusión entre Shakespeare y las calles, almacenes y pueblos de la Nicaragua contemporánea se manifiestan de manera perspicaz, y donde los espacios físicos y el medio ambiente son utilizados artísticamente.

Author's biography

Els van Poppel is a theatre director and lecturer in Nicaragua, Central America. Originally from Holland, where she studied Theatre Science at the University of Utrecht, Holland, combined with practical theatre work at the Theatre Academy, she went in 1982 to support the Revolution in Nicaragua and is still living there. She has participated in various directing projects in Holland as well as Nicaragua. After many years' work in theatre, giving workshops, directing plays, organising festivals and interchanges, and supervising students, in 2000 she formed MOVITEP with four Nicaraguan arts professionals. Apart from this, she co-organises an annual International Theatre Festival in Nicaragua, now in its thirteenth year.

SHAKESPEARE IN NICARAGUA

The Movimiento de Teatro Popular Sin Fronteras (MOVITEP-SF) is a non-profit arts organisation in Nicaragua that was born in 2000 as an initiative of three theatre directors, a visual artist and an organiser of cultural events. Before that time, we were all employees of a national arts organisation but, seeking independence, we separated ourselves and started our own 'business', taking with us five theatre groups from different places in the country. At present, MOVITEP comprises nine groups, whose plays are directed by the three directors and some young directors we have trained. The scenery is created by the group, together with the visual artist. Most of the groups involved comprise young people, some consist of children, and there are also participating adults. Some of these are professionals who make their living through theatre. Others are students or have another 'day' job. Depending on the project and the time available for realising it, sometimes all groups are involved, and sometimes just some of them.

The themes of the plays we direct and present are mostly based on a subject concerning a social issue: family violence; the problems associated with HIV-AIDS; environment issues; sexual exploitation of children and youngsters; and so on.

Another branch of MOVITEP's work involves a two-year training program for theatre-makers. As well as this, our visual artist offers a two-year training course on technical theatre to young people with the objective that they can both work independently and be involved in the production work of the MOVITEP presentations. The pilot training program will end in 2008 with fifteen graduates. However, we hope that this training will continue, although it is difficult to get a job in Nicaragua, and even more difficult to get one in theatre! Nevertheless, some non-governmental organisations and other institutions such as embassies are recently becoming more open to the use of theatre in their programs. This, together with the very culturally aware character of the Nicaraguan people, will perhaps lead to more theatre work in the country.

One of the most vital characteristics of MOVITEP-SF, besides the concentration on social themes, is its multidisciplinary character. While in the beginning we emphasised the special character of our work mainly through the performance style, now we are developing an interdisciplinary theatre in which the location, the objects made by some of the actors, and the creation of special and unusual lighting all play an important role because of their effect in the whole performance event. Over the years, we have come to realise through experience that the kind of audience that gathers to watch a play in the street likes to be surprised by shifting images, while long word-based texts are not generally suitable.

Our kind of multidisciplinary theatre has been developed through a number of processes and phases. The first project that we did as MOVITEP-SF (2000) was an interchange with Monsterverbond, an Object-theatre group from Holland. This project resulted in an intercultural theatre event on the theme of 'machismo', based on Nicaraguan legends. The making of objects in a range of different forms relating to the context of the play took priority in this cooperation. One of the conditions was that the material had to be found in the country itself. Moreover, the close collaboration with our visual arts colleague led to an explosive and creative expansion in the use of visual effects by the members of the organisation. This was further developed through the Shakespeare work that followed.

Shakespeare project

As Martin Esslin (1974) states in his Introduction to Jan Kott's *Shakespeare our Contemporary*:

Great works of art have an autonomous existence, independent of the intention and personality of their creators and independent also of the circumstances of the time of their creation, that is the mark of their greatness. (1974: xi)

It is exactly for this reason that, in 2005, MOVITEP-SF launched the interesting idea that we would not only study but, much more importantly, bring Shakespeare's work to life in performance. His universal themes — power, the abuse of power, the women behind the power and murder for power — as well as love in all its aspects are all very pertinent to contemporary Nicaraguan society.

Besides the subject-matter itself, in the Shakespeare project we had to incorporate some other unconventional disciplines, which until now had not been used in the work of the MOVITEP-SF groups. These disciplines were essential and autonomous parts of the 'scene-setting' or mise-en-scene, and influenced in an unconventional way how we used the theatre space. We needed to create lighting that would be effective in accomplishing theatrical effects to enrich the performance. We also had to investigate and identify an adequate location that would intensify and reinforce the impact of the subject and the performance.

In 2005, Nicoline Nagtzaam and Erik Gramberg, two specialists in 'Shakespeare based on lighting and location', who were lecturers in the Theatre department of the HK-Amsterdam, were invited by MOVITEP-SF to develop with us a project based on their specialty. Their starting point was *Richard III* and the following quotation might have been quite an appropriate response to the boldness of this enterprise:

What, do you tremble? Are you all afraid? Alas, I blame you not, for you are mortal ... (Richard III, 1,2)

This was followed by five weeks of analysis and exploitation of the chosen space and experimentation with the most intricate and appropriate lighting for the different scenes and situations, including working in the ridge of the roof and outside around the building.

The following is one example of how the space contributed to the play's theme and impact: while inside the theatre there is a scene going on between Richard III and Isabel (Queen Elizabeth in English), literally and figuratively outside there is a personage, the hated Queen Margarita (Margaret), Richard's mother, now repudiated and in exile. She is an outsider who slides and manoeuvres now outside the corridors of power, represented in our version of *Richard III* by her manoeuvring and sliding around the building, along the wall, half of which is composed of an iron structure with holes through which she whispers words of damnation to the actors inside who react with fear and horror. The effect of this kind of use of the space intensifies the mysterious and hostile impact of the performance.

In the middle of the performance space inside, a square wooden batten is hung with a lot of small lamps, which light up only the character who has the power at that moment. At the start of the scene, that is Isabel (Elizabeth), the wife of Richard's sick brother the King. It is Richard who wants to take the power (and the throne), and the only way he can reach that is through manipulation, intrigues, attacks and murders — the real struggle for power, which he achieves through a series of coups. In relation to the content, the possession of power is represented by his seizure of the lit performance space under the wooden square. So he has to expel Isabel from this space, taking a cruel joy in the expulsion. After that, when he has won the space, automatically the only space left for Isabel is outside, where she confronts the same destiny as Margarita — a powerful evocation of the theme.

In this Shakespeare project, attention was paid to the poetic language, the dramaturgy and the *creación colectiva*, or collective creation process. The play took shape first in small groups, then with the whole group (nine actors and the two specialists) through a process where everyone could experiment, give their ideas and comments, and all contributions were discussed. The final presentation product was both experimental and successful.

In 2006, four groups of MOVITEP-SF each produced a Shakespearean play, based on their apprenticeship in the *Richard III* project, emphasising the location to create more impact with the public.

El Capullo is a theatre-group in Lagartillo, a village of 1000 very culturally minded inhabitants that further develops with every new play, because from the beginning the whole village is involved with the group in the process of creating a play — a real example of community theatre. El Capullo presented *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the woods at the end of the village (see Figure 1), which naturally provided a romantic atmosphere. The effect was actually enhanced by a technical problem. The electricity was lost that night, so they had to solve the problem with candlelight. This gave a special effect to the three love stories, developing on their different social levels. Physically, this was represented on three different levels for which a huge space was needed, in which the characters and their stories — each one in its own space — appeared at a distance from the audience, almost like puppets or dolls, jumping, playing, flirting and running around to create the atmosphere of lightness and joy.

The audience was impressed by the fact that a well-chosen location could be of such an importance in the presentation of a play.



Figure 1: Madejas, Membrillo and Comodon (Bottom, Quince and Snug) rehearse their right royal entertainment

In Pueblo Nuevo, a village of 3000 inhabitants in the north of the country, the theatre group is called Teatro Nuevo. This group has its origin in the annual Easter presentation of traditional Passion Plays, so they are very well known by the people. On the night they presented *Hamlet* (see Figure 2), performed in the marketplace, the whole village came running to the event with their plastic chairs to sit on. The market bordered the cemetery where the ghost of Hamlet's father appeared. The palace of Claudius and his Gertrudis (Gertrude) was situated on the roof of the marketplace. The fundamental impression that this location tried to transmit to the audience was one of a wide, majestic environment in which the characters lose themselves and also lose contact with the other characters, and with reality. After the presentation, the people went back to their homes carrying their chairs while earnestly discussing the problems posed by the play. For the audience, this space was actually too huge: it was impossible entirely to follow the play uninterrupted — for instance, the scenes in the cemetery were too far away. Besides, there were children, dogs and cats, and drunken people who wandered in and out of the scenes, which distracted attention. Nevertheless, Shakespeare would have been very amused seeing that about 600 people really were enjoying his play, following Hamlet and Ophelia's every step, and offering them plentiful comments and advice.



Figure 2: Hamlet, flanked by Horatio and Bernardo, confronts the ghost

In Matagalpa, the theatre-group Quetzalcoatl presented a very interesting Macbeth in a four-floor building constructed round a central atrium (see Figure 3), so that the audience, who were sitting inside the building on the atrium floor, could follow the play from all sides. The inventive lighting effects made a particularly deep impact on the public. The choice for the setting of this four-floor building was based on the idea that Macbeth runs away from his actions, and runs away from his bad and desperate conscience. He runs through the whole building: we see him, followed by his henchmen, first above then below, now on one side then on the other side: mind and body unable to rest. Meanwhile, Lady Macbeth stays on the same floor (the first floor) throughout, where she organises her meetings with her husband. She doesn't move to another floor. The witches inhabit only the ground floor. They are very earthly and concrete.



Figure 3: Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have murder in mind

In Managua, another and different *Midsummer Night's Dream* was presented under, in and through old, enormous and romantic trees (see Figure 4), from which appear Theseus and his Hippolyta on horseback, with Puck beating around and in the bushes. Again, the space was specially chosen for this play. We made an extensive investigation to see what the possibilities for us might be if we used the location as it was, how to use the trees, moving from one tree to another, going through the trees, having some of the trees painted as animal figures, using branches for a rocking chair or a canopy. This was an important feature and, again, part of the success of the production. The imaginative use of the trees fitted well into the complicated love affairs, their complexity and density reinforced without imposed psychological effects. The play's happy end was symbolised by confetti that showered down from the trees, falling like leaves on Puck and the lovers.



Figure 4: Theseus and Hippolyta, not forgetting the horse

The most important benefit of this exciting experience is that the actors are now more conscious of what they can achieve, and therefore they dare to experiment. Even for non-professional actors, the use of a special location gives their acting added impetus. In any good atmosphere, the actor always grows. It is our opinion that, for community theatre especially, it can be a very interesting and useful method to identify a good natural setting, with artistic, well-designed lighting, for the rehearsals and presentation of a play with the aim of enhancing the performance and consequently the whole production.

Another very important positive feature of this kind of use of space and lighting is that we always choose the location to be accessible to its audience, far away from the official theatre where a high entrance price is invariably asked. Besides, such theatres only exist in the capital city, Managua (three of them, to be exact). The remainder of the Nicaraguan people do not see much theatre — only when MOVITEP-SF passes by to present a play. And then the whole town turns out to watch Shakespeare.

Reference

Esslin, M. (1974). Introduction. In J. Kott (ed.), *Shakespeare our contemporary*. New York: W.W. Norton.