Metatheatrical Storms in Georges Lavaudant's *Une Tempête…* (2010) and Oskaras Koršunovas' *Miranda* (2011)

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Introduction: Georges Lavaudant and Oskaras Koršunovas

About ten years ago, two European directors, one Lithuanian (Oskaras Koršunovas), the other French (Georges Lavaudant), proposed their readings of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in stage versions that were advertised, from their very title, as "adaptations": if Koršunovas, with *Miranda*, announced a focus on the main female character, Lavaudant's use of the indefinite article – *"Une" Tempête…*– placed his work into a series, introducing it as one of the many *Tempests* available, while the ellipsis seemed to imply that there is more to this production than just another staging of Shakespeare's play.

While for both directors this was their first take on *The Tempest*, neither was at his first encounter with Shakespeare: on the contrary, both Koršunovas and Lavaudant had authored, in the previous decades, major productions, some of which had toured abroad, and their different encounters with the poet had strongly shaped their theatre aesthetics. Georges Lavaudant, who started his directing career in the early 1970s, is one of the most prominent French theatre directors, the author of a "bastard" or "hybrid" theatre[1] (Bailly/Lavaudant 39), which mixes genres, music and pantomime, high and mass culture. Neither burdened by the English theatrical traditions, nor by

[1] « Notre art, si j'ose dire, c'est sans doute […] le mélange des genres, avec du verbe, de la musique, de la pantomime, ce que j'appelle un théâtre bâtard ou 'métissé' ».

mainstream theatre training, the director felt free to propose an irreverent, iconoclastic approach to Shakespeare's plays.

Lavaudant first became interested in Shakespeare in the early 1970s, when he directed Ariel Garcia-Valdès in *King Lear* (1974), but his most successful Shakespearean production was undoubtedly the 1979 *La Rose et la hache (The Rose and the axe)*, an adaptation of Carmelo Bene's rewriting of *Richard III*: "a particularly happy job, as it was very irreverent,"[2] claimed the director in an interview (Lavaudant, 1989: 164), highlighting the main feature of his work. *Richard III* was to haunt Lavaudant's career, both in this reduced version (which he re-staged in 2004 and 2019) and in the larger, "full cast" version, presented at the 1984 Avignon Festival, starring the same Ariel Garcia-Valdès.

Dramatist Daniel Loayza translated and adapted *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for Lavaudant's June 2010 production[3], which was first presented in Lyon's Roman theatre, as part of the Nuits de Fourvière summer open-air festival and in the autumn at the MC93 Bobigny (Paris). The director's project was to confront these two plays in which magic is at work, considering that the lightness of the *Dream* could soften the metaphysical aspects of *The Tempest* (Soleymat 2010). According to Clifford Armion (93), it was Loayza who brought to Lavaudant's attention (and who emphasized in the French translation) the intermingling semantic fields of dreams and storms.

Oskaras Koršunovas, who made his debut as a director in the early 1990s, soon took the Lithuanian and world theatre by storm with his productions in which "the stage action and time function under dream logic" (Vasinaukaite 9). In 1998, the director founded his own independent theatre (OKT Theatre, Vilnius), where he staged *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1999), *Romeo and Juliet* (2003) and *Hamlet* (2008).

In *Miranda* (2011), Koršunovas used the play-within-the-play device to adapt *The Tempest* for a cast of just two actors: a dissident intellectual and his disabled daughter, secluded in an Eastern-European block of flats, performed Shakespeare's play as part of what looked like a daily ritual. The production (OKT and Vilnius City

[2] "un travail très heureux, car il était très irrévérencieux" (My translation.)
[3] A coproduction of the Festival and of the MC 93, starring André Marcon as Prospero, who doubled as Theseus and Oberon. The production was initially a project the director set up with student actors in Montpellier, and the professional production included students from the conservatory headed by Valdès (Lavaudant in Soleymat, 2010).

Theatre), starring Povillas Budrys and Airida Gintautaite, toured to Italy, Poland (2011), France (2013) and Romania (2014). The director declared having been influenced by Jan Kott's reading of the play, who saw it as "a social drama about the never-ending and absurd struggle for power, […] as the drama of power and an individual" (Koršunovas 2011). In the introductory statement on the production, Koršunovas assimilated Shakespeare's island to the "zones of deportation" (Koršunovas 2011) that the authorities in the Soviet Union set up for "inconvenient" people, and identified Prospero as a creator striving to maintain spiritual life:

> Miranda interests me most in this play [...] She is most often regarded as a naive princess, though she has been created by Prospero, she is Prospero's soul [...] Eventually, in deportation to desert islands creators still used to raise their Mirandas. (Koršunovas 2011)

Two Metatheatrical Tempests

While Lavaudant's beautiful, polite, fluid, seemingly a-political "theatre of images" (Fayard 206) seems to have little in common with Koršunovas's domestic, gloomy, highly political production, I would argue that both directors explored the role that metatheatricality has in shaping performative identities. Their productions were also a way to interrogate the challenges of performing and spectating Shakespeare today.

They indeed refused stable, unified narrative, and decided to frame Shakespeare's play, blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality and between fictional worlds, thus complicating Shakespeare's own metafictional devices. Koršunovas cast *The Tempest* as an inset performance played by father and daughter, while Lavaudant's *Tempête* framed a condensed version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (that replaced the original pastoral offered by Prospero as a present for Miranda's wedding) and "host[ed]" the mechanicals' performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*.

According to Christine Dymkowski, the essential paradox at the core of the play relies on the contrast between the spectacular quality of the first scene and the performative space for which it was initially designed:

> Although throughout its performance history *The Tempest* has proved to be perhaps the most visually spectacular of Shakespeare's plays, it was written to be performed on a virtually bare stage. (71)

While using different techniques, both Koršunovas and Lavaudant provided a modern equivalent of this initial bare platform, presenting the storm of Act I, Scene 1 as a metatheatrical, artificial, extremely fragile device, built with the simplest, most trivial means. However, neither gave a sense of what Andrew Gurr identified as an

essential quality of the shipwreck scene – its initial realism, on which the whole play depends: "it is the verification of Prospero's magic and the declaration that it is all only a stage play" (Gurr 256). In both productions, the storm was denounced from the outset as a fabricated event, whose performers (father and daughter in *Miranda*, Prospero and Ariel in *Une Tempête…*) were shown enjoying the process of staging.

Home-made magic

As I entered the theatre hall at the Craiova Shakespeare Festival in 2014 to attend Koršunovas's production, Prospero's island appeared to me, first of all, as an island of the past. Placed centre-stage on an otherwise dark platform, the carefully reconstructed drawing room in a Communist flat (by set designer Dainius Liškevicius) unsettlingly recalled my parents' drawing-room back in the 1980s. I took nostalgic pleasure in recognising the different objects, sunken galleons of a half-forgotten world – the shabby library shelves, the poorly functioning lamp TV set, my grandmother's old radio – little expecting the role these extremely mundane objects were to play in creating Shakespeare's play on Koršunovas's stage. In a way, the realism of the set played a role similar to the initial shipwreck scene in *The Tempest*: it was the director's way of luring his audience into expecting a realistic staging, as it was in stark contrast with the dreamlike atmosphere of the play.

Within this closed, domestic space, the only references to a desert island or to water were ironic, suggesting that the relationship with the Shakespearian reference was going to be a subverted and mediated one: a potted green cactus stage left and, stage right, the black and white TV which broadcasted a ballet solo, which could be Michel Fokine's *Dying Swan*[4]. Maria Goltsman contends that this ballet, the most politicized in the world, which enjoyed a mythical status in the Soviet Union, is strongly connected with death, as it used to be broadcasted "on days of official mourning and funerals," but also shown on days of political turmoil such as in August 19th, 1991 (the last day of the Soviet Union), serving as "a cloak, with the television screen masking reality" (Goltsman 310). As this opening image suggested, Tchaikovsky's mythical ballet (and the symbolism of classical dance in the Soviet

[4] Michel Fokine's solo (1907) is considered a step in the evolution of the myth of the Dying Swan. Maria Goltsman points out that *Swan Lake* and *Dying Swan* "were closely connected to each other and for some people they were even inseparable" (Goltsman 311). In this particular instance, the ballet is performed on the swan theme in Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, not on Saint-Saëns' swan theme from his *Le Carnaval des animaux*.

Union) was going to model the way in which father and daughter told their story by staging Shakespeare's work.

References to the storm accumulated at the beginning of the frame performance (the father-daughter story), but in a deconstructed, displaced manner. *Miranda* started with the girl asleep in her armchair, while her father, behind transparent sliding doors, paced up and down, like an actor preparing to enter the stage, overcome with stage fright. His chaotic movements appeared as a grotesque counterpart of the ballerina's dance on the screen. A storm of applause burst as he finally precipitated into the performance space (on tiptoe, not to disturb his daughter's sleep), further superimposing his image on that of the dancer, in a grotesque, unsettling way. The character, turned into a performer despite himself, kept glancing nervously at his watch and seemed to hesitate whether to make a very important phone call. He was going to perform, during the next hour and a half, his own swan song.

As father and daughter engaged in their evening routine, the storm motif occurred again, foreshadowing yet another essential feature of Koršunovas's treatment of Shakespeare: when "Prospero" painstakingly tried to feed his daughter her soup, she suddenly spit it out, creating a "storm in a soup kettle" (Jevsejevas 2011). While suggesting a moody, tense relationship between the protagonists, this episode announced that in this performance theatrical fiction would be constructed with the help of the most mundane objects that the performers' imagination would morph into fictional objects.

The Tempest proper started as a bed-time story which the caring, affectionate father told his daughter, as part of a daily ritual. Just like Shakespeare's Prospero, this Soviet intellectual seemed to be particularly fond of books, a passion he had handed over to the girl. Only she was most selective and extreme in her reading choices: Miranda's story was the only one she wanted to be told, again and again: "there's never enough for you," the protagonist exclaimed, slightly annoyed. As her father opened the book, the daughter turned into a very active and demanding spectator: for the time being, just like an old-school Shakespeare scholar, she would admit no cuts or omissions. Her father had to obey the rules of the game, and started reading the list of characters – most of which would not appear in this adaptation. Indeed, it was an exercise in the art of (re)reading the canonical text that Koršunovas

proposed in his production, and this (re)reading was conceived as a playful activity, and an escape from an oppressive reality.

As he read the list of names, the protagonist also acted them out, capturing the essence of the characters in a gesture or in the tone of his voice, as if addressing a young child. Thus, a sort of dramatization emerged that suggested the transition from text to fiction, where the girl joined in. She was already playing the part of bashful Miranda by the time her father uttered the name of Ferdinand; she was the one who pronounced "Miranda," as if taking possession of her character, and then "mimed" the part of Ariel, that she would later act out. The game of casting as well as the female protagonist's reactions to the different characters[5] announced the massive editing that structured this production, from which the court party, for instance, was significantly absent.

The father made his first artistic decision when he started the embedded performance with Laertes' words "my revenge will come" (*Hamlet* IV. 7. 29) that he directed at the absent interlocutor on the telephone. Then, book in hand, he recited Ariel's sermon to the shipwreck (Act III, Scene 3), thus suggesting that this was not going to be a fairy-tale *Tempest*. Meanwhile, his daughter listened to the sound of the sea in a shell and imitated the wind, as if trying to better grasp the atmosphere of the play.

Like an amateur Prospero, Koršunovas's protagonist became the director of a performance when he decided that the storm would be represented on stage: "we'll make the tempest," he told his daughter, involving her into the creation of the production. Here again, the simplest means, the most trivial objects accomplished the transition from reality to fiction. The storm effect was obtained first, on an aural level, by Prospero's turning on the poorly-functioning radio, and second, in a visual way, with the help of a fan, which moved the pages of the book in the girl's lap. In a touchingly ridiculous gesture, the latter gently moved her dress back and forth to suggest the waves. In fact, throughout the first scene of the embedded production, the female protagonist acted as a clumsy stage assistant, giving "stage" expression to the storyteller's words. In her hands, the shell became the boat on the stormy sea, on which Prospero and Miranda, symbolized by an old radio tube, travelled to the desert island.

[5] For instance, she got bored when Trinculo or Stephano were mentioned, excited at Ferdinand or Ariel, irritated at Antonio.

During this opening scene, Koršunovas's stage devices blurred the boundaries between the fictional levels: when the man tried to calm down the girl at the end of Act I Scene 1, he was both Prospero reassuring Miranda and the father reassuring his ill daughter who was frightened by the terrifying sound of the sliding doors colliding and by the smoke from the burned saucepan. This constant interplay between the level of the fiction and that of the fiction-making was going to structure Koršunovas's production, as characters and conflicts in *The Tempest* enabled the father-daughter's relationship to be told. In turn, situations in Shakespeare's play were rewritten in the light of the conflicts within the framing play.

Thus, the initial storm-making appeared as a pitiful attempt at creating fiction (and life) with the basest means: just as in Ionesco's *Exit the King*[6], father and daughter were the only inhabitants of a collapsing world, and if they acted out all the parts in the *Tempest*, this was also because no one else was left in their tiny universe, seemingly cut out form the rest of the world. Although it started as a good-night story, this *Tempest* was far from being a fairy-tale: characters were either tormented or tormenting figures, abusing and/or letting themselves be abused by the others. Ariel, played by the daughter, claimed his (her) freedom in a violent manner and seemed to intimidate Prospero: (s)he burst into a disco dance that contrasted with the handicapped movements of the girl/Miranda. Ferdinand did not love Miranda and mocked her: he parodied ballet movements, as if trying to persuade her into believing that he was the prince she had been waiting for. Finally, Caliban tried to rape Miranda, with the help of the vacuum cleaner.

No reconciliation, no forgiveness was hinted at, no wedding was to take place on this island. From the director's point of view, it suggested work camps in the Soviet Union[7], where intellectuals had to create their own version of "Miranda" – a symbol of freedom – in order to bear their imprisonment. Towards the end of the performance, as Ariel/Miranda was to be seen on the upper shelves of the library, books in hand, like a flying bird, singing Ariel's lines ("Where the bee sucks, there suck I," IV.1.88) like a lullaby, Prospero/the father attempted to retain her with the words of another Shakespearean father, the mad King Lear, who, approaching his own death, dreamt

[6] The original title is *Le Roi se meurt*.

[7] Autors's statement on http://www.campusbn.org/évènement/festival-les-boreales-miranda-dapres-la-tempete-de-shakespeare-oskaras-korsunovas/ : « L'île où débarquent Prospero, duc de Milan, et sa fille Miranda, après le naufrage de leur bateau, nous rappelle les camps de travail où les autorités isolaient les libres penseurs, et notamment les goulags de l'Union Soviétique, aujourd'hui disparue ».

of spending the rest of his life in a paradise-prison, together with his daughter Cordelia. The girl seemed to refuse, kissed him good-bye and slowly disappeared. When he woke up from his fantasy, his daughter was no longer in her armchair. Far from the utopian discourse of Lear, "Prospero" recited Macbeth's soliloquy, who saw life as "a tale/ Told by an idiot" (V.5.25-26), before concluding with Prospero's disillusioned speech: "and my ending is despair" (V, Epilogue, 15).

This was not the "brave new world" Shakespeare's Miranda had wondered at four centuries before. On the contrary, it was an absurd world thought by a 21st century Prospero who had apparently read Ionesco and Beckett[8]: Koršunovas's Prospero would remain on the island – his "soul," Miranda, having vanished from stage – there would be no one to answer the phone when it finally rang back, at the very end of the production.

A dreamy tempest

Georges Lavaudant's production presented performance as a site of conflict and its complex embedding commented on ways of staging Shakespeare nowadays. The director, who had initially conceived his production for Lyon's open-air Roman theatre, opted for a bare stage here, where play areas were delimited mainly through lighting. His opening storm, which lasted for about one minute, consisted of an undulating piece of blue canvas evoking the waves (which was not without recalling Giorgio Strehler's famous rendition of the storm), completed with sound and light-effects that suggested thunder and lightning, but also with the dim voices of men screaming with fear. No ship was to be seen, but someone stood in the middle of the "sea," facing the audience, controlling the waves with large, theatrical gestures that reminded those of a conductor: in Act I Scene 2, the audience identified this character as Ariel (performed by an actress – Astrid Bas), and the sea as Prospero's magic cloth. When watching the blue canvas, the spectator could glimpse, through flashes of light, the stagehands manipulating the canvas: thus, the storm was denounced, from the very beginning, as an artefact, a stage device, the making of which the audience was invited to witness.

When it calmed down, the gentle hissing of the waves seemed to bring the first shipwreck on the island. A sleeping Miranda, dressed in white, lay on a white circular

[8] The last image, with the man sitting in his armchair and covered with a blanket, was not without recalling the disabled Ham in *Endgame.*

floor-tiled box, in the middle of an otherwise dark platform, which suggested a spotlight. Prospero's island was a spotlight, or a bright spot on a theatre stage in this production, on which repeated storms would bring theatrical performances again and again. The initial spectacular tempest was going to be echoed by a whole series of tempests (retaining only the aural dimension of the first tableau), thus introducing the different episodes as inset micro-performances. Jean-Christophe Bailly stressed Lavaudant's particular interest in lights. The French director generally starts working on them from the very beginning of the rehearsals: they are endowed with a metatheatrical quality, and function like a luminous score that enables him to comment on the fiction in a playful way[9] (Bailly *in* Ciret 148). Indeed, throughout the production, lights would frame the actions and the characters, which created ephemeral performing areas suggesting a game of hide-and-seek.

While talking about the spectacular event they still seemed to be witnessing, Prospero and his daughter delivered their speeches facing the audience, which was thus associated with the shipwrecks caught in the storm. Throughout the performance, a sliding door, placed backstage, provided access to a space immersed in blue light which functioned first as an antechamber, then as a transition area between the wings and the stage (characters often stopped there to watch the others perform), and later as a frame enclosing micro-performances. Thus, if the auditorium was associated with the sea, the space that was supposed to represent the sea was turned into a viewpoint: the sea/auditorium surrounded the island/performing arena, it was a place from which fiction was to be watched and commented upon.

With Lavaudant, as with Koršunovas, concrete, specific elements in the theatre house represented objects of the fictional world, estranging the play text from the performance text. Thus, Caliban's cave was figured by a trapdoor and Ferdinand's burden of wood by a spotlight fixture, which implicitly turned him into a stagehand: by being obliged to do a slave's work, the prince had fallen from his former position as an actor. Indeed, in Lavaudant's production the inhabitants of Prospero's island fell into two main categories: actors and spectators. In turn, Ferdinand, the shipwrecks, Caliban and his companions or the young lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

[9] « Faire entrer en douceur le hors-champ dans le champ clos du drame, pour écrire autour du drame et avec lui une partition lumineuse précise comme un toucher, émouvante comme une sorte de jeu de colin-maillard auquel on assisterait ».

were watched by other characters, positioned either in the darker areas of the platform or in the blue area at the rear. The real spectators were thus placed in a position of control, as they were watching characters watching other characters. The fact that the "performers" were most often isolated by spotlights detached the respective tableau from the rest of the play, turning it into a performative event to be enjoyed for its own sake. Shakespeare's plot became a series of "performances-within-the-play": *The Tempest* was interrupted to "shelter" *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which was also interrupted to embed *Pyramus and Thisbe*. The storm that had been denounced from the very beginning as a performance, now became a strategy of disjunction, undermining realism and introducing the different numbers of a performative event – just like a Russian doll construction – to suggest that theatre could be forever embedded into theatre.

The embedding of fictional levels provided for a *mise en abyme* of performance and presented theatre as a playful activity. Lavaudant's *Une Tempête…* turned into a collection of instances of theatre-within-the-theatre or of mini-performances that could be read as different ways of staging Shakespeare nowadays. The director usually opts, according to Nicole Fayard (211), for an anti-historical approach, ignoring the political and historical aspects of Shakespeare's plays. This production used time and space references in order to include mini-Shakespearian performances within its structure, ranging from a historical reconstruction of an Elizabethan production to a 21st-century amateur performance. The spots that delineated paths of light on the platform turned the latter into a playground where fragile fictional worlds came to life only to be replaced shortly after by other fictional worlds. Characters did not hesitate to change roles in order to entertain the other characters as well as, of course, the real audience. The idea of play governed the characters' interactions, turning Lavaudant's *theatrum mundi* into a coloured playground: under the power of Prospero's magic, Ferdinand performed funny jumps, while the lovers of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* seemed to be involved in an energetic game of hide-and-seek.

Alonso and his companions landed on Lavaudant's stage (Act II, Scene 1) as a compact group clad in Renaissance outfits, and moved as if caught in a slow-motion storm, or as if having just descended from a roller coaster. Utterly confused and a bit dusty (wearing strong white make-up), the shipwreck victims still bore the marks of the terrible experience they had been through. The men's incongruous costumes

complicated the significance of their journey, adding a temporal layer to the spatial one: the court party seemed to have emerged right from Shakespeare's *Tempest*, or from a performance of the play as it was given during Shakespeare's time. Thus, on the one hand Act II, Scene 1 looked like a possible reconstruction of an original Renaissance production of the play (that drew attention to the play as performance); on the other hand, the shipwreck victims appeared as visitors from another time who were suddenly confronted to a "brave new world", i.e. a 21st-century playhouse, where they felt rather lost, and where their "garments" were ironically "fresh".

Prospero, who has traditionally been seen as a director, did become an actor during the wedding performance that he offered Miranda and Ferdinand. Under the gaze of the (real) audience, he modified his costume in order to become Oberon. By exhibiting the presence of the actor, Lavaudant put forward the idea of theatre conceived as an intimate relationship shared by audience and performers alike.

On the contrary, the mechanicals who presented their production of *Pyramus and Thisbe* were depicted as contemporary French workers: Lavaudant's actors used their real names, so that Bottom or Quince became Pascal or Antoine. As they wore blue work outfits, the characters relocated the play in contemporary France. In this dreamy *Tempest*, the mechanicals had read Kott's *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*. Theatre-making appeared as an essentially playful activity on Lavaudant's island, where actors constructed and deconstructed fictions not to create illusion, but to assert it was a performance. "My first field of invention is creation," claimed the director. "I ask what is the theatrical machine, and how to make it function [as a] zone of illusion, fascination and mystification" (Lavaudant *in* Champagne 95). His lively wrecks, caught in a never-ending performative game, identified Prospero's magic as theatre magic in this production.

Conclusion

The two productions discussed here staged the initial storm as a theatrical and playful devices that displayed the theatre as a machine, explicitly casting the spectator as a witness. In spite of their very different aesthetics (an overcrowded stage versus a bare platform), Prospero's island became a locus of performance, floating in a darkened no-man's-land. In a theatrical era of sophisticated technology, these productions (which however used modern stagecraft) seemed to go back to a simple theatricality. They created illusion with the help of the simplest theatrical

means, and presented the performative event as a negotiated one, under the spectators' eyes, as part of either a ritual (Koršunovas) or a theatrical improvisation (Lavaudant). Both edited the original text heavily, situating it in a complex narrative frame with multiple performing identities, in order to make the viewer travel among layers of fiction that negotiated either with political issues (Koršunovas) or with ways of staging Shakespeare today (Lavaudant).

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