

Eternal Literary Images and Their Interpretation in Provincial Theatre

Ekaterina Zueva, Elena Shevchenko, Alsu Vafina
Kazan Federal University

Abstract

This paper deals with two stage adaptations of Molière's play Dom Juan or The Feast with the Statue, presented by Tatar State Academic Theatre (director – Farid Bikchantayev, Kazan) and Kazan Russian Academic theatre (director – Grigoriy Dityatkovskiy, Saint Petersburg). Both of these productions were shown during the theatre season of 2015-2016. However they can be considered completely different. Farid Bikchantayev starts the dialogue with the text of Molière, trying to actualize its meaning according with nowadays interests. The version of Grigoriy Dityatkovskiy is exaggeratedly theatrical. The director creates vivid imaginative form, which dominates over the plot part. Kazan stagings of Molière show different approaches to the classical material and eternal images of the world literature.

Key words: contemporary interpretations of the classics, eternal images, Molière, Dom Juan, staging, Kazan theatres.

1. Introduction.

World literature classics also plays important role in the repertoire of Kazan theatres. They addressed to the creativity of W. Shakespeare, Molière, P. Calderon, F. Schiller, B. Brecht, F. Lorca more than once. Before perestroika this classical material served as some kind of Aesopian language, with the help of which people of art raised problems that were forbidden to talk out loud. [Prokhorova, 2014]. During the past years the situations changed completely. The classics more often turns to be the reason for talking about universal, timeless problems. Talking about recent experience, production of the comedy *Dom Juan* by Molière in Tatar State Academic Theatre (director – Farid Bikchantayev, 2015) became really vivid event.

2. Methods

The methodological basis of research is formed by the works devoted to the theatre history and theory, especially E. Gorfunkel's research about the play as the director's text [Gorfunkel, 1999]; A. Shevchenko research about theatrical discourse [Shevchenko, 2012]; V. Shamina works about contemporary drama [Shamina, 2011] and other works on theatre [Kendall, 1990; Friedman, 2008] and Molière [Goldsby, 2009; Bradby, 2006]

3. Results

Dom Juan comedy, staged in Tatar State Academic Theatre by famous dramatist Farid Bikchantayev, acquires new traits, dictated by the peculiarity of the director's idea and concept. *Dom Juan* play is created as an intellectual drama. Here the conflict is based not on the characters opposition, but on the opposition of ideas and points of view. The director shows debunking of Dom Juan's opponents as an embodiment of idea of humanistic values failure. This idea turns to be the key one for the understanding of contemporary public conscience character and culture state. This representation of traditional text can be explained by F. Bikchantayev's desire to create such theatrical performance, which shows different from Molière's attitude viewpoint to the person's position in modern world. The performance of Tatar State Academic theatre demonstrates the failure of belief in progress possibility, because "two World Wars, Cold War and "successes" of intercontinental market economy that came after them destroyed the centuries old belief in human as the reasonable being, in progress as the saving energy of the universe" [Rudnev, 2011].

Directorial theatre of Farid Bikchantayev is like poetic translation: it is not only the attempt to translate to other language (either verbal or stage one), but the conversation of two artists. As an every living dialogue it is full with replies and pauses, displays of solidarity and disagreement, expression bursts and moments of significant silence. In that case theatrical text dominates over literary one according to the modern postdramatic theory.

Dityatkovskiy's version performed on the stage of Kazan Russian Academic theatre displays optimism of the author's idea and puts into practice the comic nature of Molière's text. In order to achieve positive emotional state various additional instruments suggested by machinery of contemporary theatre art are used. Ideas of commedia dell'arte, elements of symbolic theatre, lighting solution give the sense of buffoonery and carnival.

4. Discussion

Dom Juan by Molière had a lot of interpretations. He was considered to be a genius lover, voluptuous cynic, violator of moral statutes, blasphemer, dreamer, hypocrisy fighter and so on. That fact is closely connected with the ambiguity of the image itself. On the one hand, Dom Juan is an egoistic, light-minded, seducer, careless adventurer, who believes neither in God, nor in Devil, moral laws violator. On the other hand, he is a person that can feel beauty, who can give a woman wonderful moments of happiness. He can't stand the hypocrisy and can easily risk his life in order to help stranger in trouble.

The Kazan theatre season of 2015-2016 was marked by two stage productions of Molière play *Dom Juan*, presented by Tatar State Academic Theatre (director – Farid Bikchantayev, Kazan)

and Kazan Russian Academic theatre (director – Grigoriy Dityatkovskiy, Saint Petersburg). The idea of addressing the creativity of the great comedy writer came up to the both directors independently. However they showed absolutely different approach to the Molière's play and absolutely different understanding of one of the most famous and mysterious images in the world drama.

Farid Bikchantayev, the director of Tatar State Academic Theatre, tries to free up the image of Dom Juan from clichés that have been created during three and a half centuries. Therefore he starts a dialogue with the text of Molière itself. In order to do that he destroys the illusion of reality of events. Following the principle of estrangement effect of B. Brecht, actor, Radik Bariev, presents his character, trying to understand his essence and the nature of his protest. It brings to mind the famous quotation of B. Brecht: “What I mean is: if I choose to see Richard III I don't want to feel myself to be Richard III, but to glimpse this phenomenon in all its strangeness and incomprehensibility” [Brecht, 2001]. Radik Bariev following the director's concept, plays according to Brecht's principles; as if his character has already spent a certain epoch till its end and he talks, already knowing, remembering what will happen, and that's why he says the most important that should be said about this epoch during this very depicted moment, because only things that will become important are important right now. Estrangement can be found even in scenography (production designer – Sergei Skomorokhov). Theatrical scenery is very conditional. Stage is enlarged with the help of the backstage area, it is depicted as the big empty space, which is framed by transparent screen walls. The images of sea, forest, sky are projected over there when it's necessary. They might be considered the ruins of some, probably medieval, town. Such open space is the symbol of overcoming the boundaries: temporal, geographic, mental and hermeneutic. The characters costumes are also very conditional, they can't be traced to any epoch. На них в необходимые моменты проецируются изображения моря, леса, неба. The elements of theatrical machinery are naked. One can hear the sea sounds on the stage. The key atmosphere is acting one.

The key image of the whole production is lonely Dom Juan, sitting in the middle of empty stage. His loneliness is very ambiguous: on the one hand, it is the fate of extraordinary personality, challenging the society. He can easily feel hypocrisy, he stands neither routine, which love turns, nor fake father's love and piety. This world doesn't deserve anything else but mocking scorn and boredom. It brings to mind the lines of Marina Cvetaeva that might serve as an epigraph for the production of Farid Bikchantayev: “To such a crazy world\One answer - I refuse!”. The several scenes of the staging are not decided in a grotesque and comic way by chance: the drunk father of the main character Dom Louis (Iltazar Mukhametgaliev) trying to keep the falling trousers pathetically blames his son in debauchery, promising all God punishments. The seduced and left by Dom Juan Donna Elvira (Luciya Khamitova) with a fake halo and toy wings cleans the floors in the house of her seducer in an impulse of self-denial and exalted repentance. All of them are masquers participating either in human comedy or the devilish carnival, which happens in the end. Dom Juan is a stranger for all them, he steps only for a second in this grotesque whirlpool and then returns to the desert of his loneliness. The only one exception he makes for his servant Sganarelle (Iskander Khairullin), who is trickster and scrounger, but he bears naïve but strong faith in God and power of moral law. Their relations are not the ones of master and servant, but the ones of two mates. That attitude explains the moment in the first scene when Dom Juan appears carrying all his costumes, while Sganarelle is entertaining himself talking to Guzman, the usher to Donna Elvira. Sganarelle can't be separated from Dom Juan, as Sancho Pansa can't be separated from Don Quixote. He is at the same time an opponent and a reversed reflection of the main character. Arguing with Sganarelle Dom Juan wants to be persuaded in completely opposite opinion. But unsophisticated servant's point of view can't fulfil the critical conscience of Dom Juan. It meet his strong logic and shows the failure of commonplace truth and ethical evaluations. The director tries to escape univocal moralizing. The voice of truth and conscience is in doubt, that's why the heavy images are

diminished in satirical way. The noble family father turns to be hypocritical drunkard. That change is some kind of Hamlet's accusation addressed to the "fathers". It is them who made the world as it is, established the laws of hypocritical morality. Donna Elvira is also shown in an unusual way, she turned to be not a victim or Magdalene, but a comic character, caricature of fanatic piety.

Core elements of the classical culture, such as Beauty, Harmony, Faith, Truth, Justice, turned to be a sort of fake idols, that on the one hand can be easily sold on the market, on the other, become the valuable part of the mass culture, and also turn to be a part of state ideology. As it happens to faith nowadays, "when the church institution is used for promoting contemporary political way". [Rudnev, 2011]. It's not by chance that the flame, eating Dom Juan, turns for him the only real power. Saying his famous final words "O Heaven! What do I feel? An invisible fire burns me, I can move no more, and my whole body is turning to a glowing coal. Ah!?" he feels not a fear but delight and joy maybe for the first time in his life.

Therefore Farid Bikchantayev builds a bridge between two epochs, making Molière's Dom Juan a part of the XXIst century discourse. His character has a big experience of dehumanizing the humanity. The strong actors group plays its part without any mistakes following the director's idea. However each actor brings to his role a great deal of his own charm.

One of the conceptual peculiarities of the Tatar Academic Theatre production is the interaction between Dom Juan and the text of the play. It is the second reason of the main character loneliness; he is alone with the original text. The scene before final bears significant meaning, when Dom Juan before the dinner with Commander sits alone thinking about something, the text of Molière is floating on the walls. The hero has no choice, his fate has already been predetermined, *Dom Juan* has already been written. So he has to come through the final again, felling both destroying and resurrecting power of real fire.

It seems that the dialogue of Farid Bikchantayev and Molière lasts more than one year. Ambiguity of the production, meanings enrichment with a seeming simplicity, clear emphasis of scenography and light decisions (lighting designer – Evgeniy Ganzburg). "The more significant knowledge is, the stronger the feeling of mystery is" [Inostrannaya Literatura, 1995], – V. Nabokov said. Contemporary theatre doesn't give ready answers, but transfers questions to the spectator's consciousness. That's why it is not surprising, that someone perceived Kazan Dom Juan as "superfluous man", someone as "stranger", someone as the victim of "bad genetics", and someone as "tired man, disappointed with life", etc. Ambivalence and ambiguity of sayings, not reducing it to the universal plain moral are the important qualities of the contemporary theatre, which Tatar Academic Theatre, for sure, is.

We should also mention that relations of Tatar theatre and world playwriting are not easy. Its peculiar aesthetics with open vivid emotionality, intentional naivete, exaggeration and direct addressing the spectator often contradicts Western tradition. It was the reason of several artistic failures, when plays of western dramatists were domesticated, transformed to the copy of national drama or stayed something strange and was closed soon. But Tatar Academic Theatre managed to create a universal theatrical language in that very production, which is interesting to each spectator despite his nationality. Actors use Tatar language during the play, but Russian- and English-speaking spectator is not embarrassed with the earphones translation.

Now we turn to the production of *Dom Juan* made by Kazan Russian Academic Theatre. Tatyana Shakhmatova defined the differences between two productions as following: "Two productions show two possible approaches to the scenic material: from form to content and from content to form". [Shakhmatova, 2016]. The first statement is about the Russian Academic Theatre, the second one – about Tatar Academic theatre. Agreeing with T. Shakhmatova, we will move further and state that vivid art form created by director, G. Dityatkovskiy, not only dominates over the substantial side, but in fact displaces it. We deal with the all-sufficient theatricality, with joyful and vivid play component. The artistic director of the theatre, Alexandr Slavutskiy, has been

realising his conception of theatre-feast more than for one year. A famous director, Georgiy Dityaytkovskiy, invited from Saint-Petersburg, turned to be his confederate and transformed *Dom Juan* by Molière to the burst of witty jokes, improvisations, and theatrical functions. “The theatre of shadows, commedia dell’arte, the theatre of living sculptures, the pantomime language, the elements of symbolist theatre, vaudeville – all that is put in the form chosen by the director, turning the production to the quintessence of theatre itself” [Shakhmatova, 2016]. Fantasy costumes by Irina Cvetkova, stylish scenery by Alexandr Patrakov, exquisite light scheme by Evgeniy Ganzburg, soundtrack (music by Jean-Philippe Rameau and Marin Marais, Sicilian folk melodies) create special play component, which becomes the core of the whole production. Servantes of proscenium participate in the process of the play: they embody either play-actors, or street musicians, or valets. According to that fact, we should mention one of the most “magic” scenes of the play: when the Statue of Commander is “born” in front of the spectators. The servants accompanying Dom Juan smoothly and slowly dressed the actor standing on the plinth in Roman toga. After that the game of rays of light transformed his figure into sculpture, herewith servants figuratively finishes the picture.

Dom Juan performed by Ilya Slavutskiy is charming puck, tireless bon viveur and mischief, who doesn’t take seriously anything that happens in the life. Even the death seems to him a funny adventure. The spectator might find Sganarelle (Marat Golubev) near him, who is not a servant, but a mate in his tricks and devilry. Such production concept doesn’t have any tragic basis or search for clear and hidden meanings, but it lets the director and the acting cast to reveal the real nature of theatre itself.

6. Conclusion

So, the analysis of two productions of *Dom Juan* showed that Kazan versions of Molière demonstrate different approaches to the classical material and eternal literary images. Farid Bikchentayev starts a dialogue with the text of Molière, meeting the requirements of the day. Georgiy Dityaytkovskiy shows the play potential hidden in the text, underlining the theatricality of production.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

This article is done within the researches № 16-14-16020 and 16-14-16027 supported by the Russian Foundation for Humanities

REFERENCES

1. Prokhorova, T., Shamina, V. School for democracy: Interactive theater in soviet and Post-Soviet Russia // *Comparative Drama*, 2014, Volume 48, Issue 1-2 - PP. 59-73.
2. Gorfunkel, E. Drama as the director's text // Saint-Petersburg, 1999. – 175 p
3. Schevchenko, A. Theatrical discourse: structure and text // Saint-Petersburg, 2012. – 16 p.
4. Shamina, V. On the German stagings of the classical plays // *Contemporary Russian and German Drama*, 2011. - PP.15-21
5. Kendall, L. W. Mimesis as Make-Believe : On the Foundations of the Representational Arts // Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990. – 450 p.
6. Friedman, J. C. Performing Difference: Representations of 'The Other' in Film and Theatre // University Press of America, 2008. – 310 p.
7. Goldsby, R.W. Molière on stage: What's so funny? // Anthem Press, 2012. – 222 p.
8. Bradby, D., Calder, A The Cambridge Companion to Moliere // Cambridge University Press, 2006. – 230 p.
9. Brecht, B. Brecht on Theatre. The Development of an Aesthetics. // A&C Black, 2001- 344 p.
10. Rudnev, P. The themes of contemporary drama: borders of Russian and German drama // *Contemporary Russian and German Drama*, 2011. – PP. 4-14.
11. Three interviews with Vladimir Nabokov. "Paris Review", October 1967 // *Inostrannaya Literatura*, №11, 1995 – PP. 237-243.
12. Shakhmatova, T. Dom Juan had a walk on Kazan Theatres / *Moskovskiy Komsomolets – Povolzhye*, 30.03-6.04. 2016, P. 24 // <http://kazan.mk.ru/articles/2016/03/31/don-zhuan-progulyalsya-po-kazanskim-teatram.html>